THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

REVISED EDITION

6

Proverbs ~ Isaiah

Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland
General Editors

THE EXPOSITOR'S BIBLE COMMENTARY

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08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 • 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Cover Page

Title Page

Copyright

Contributors to Volume Six

Preface

Abbreviations

Proverbs

Ecclesiastes

Song of Songs

Isaiah

About the Publisher

Share Your Thoughts

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Preface

Frank Gaebelein wrote the following in the preface to the original Expositor's Bible Commentary (which first appeared in 1979): "The title of this work defi nes its purpose. Written primarily by expositors for expositors, it aims to provide preachers, teachers, and students of the Bible with a new and comprehensive commentary on the books of the Old and New Testaments." Those volumes achieved that purpose admirably. The original EBC was exceptionally well received and had an enormous impact on the life of the church. It has served as the mainstay of countless pastors and students who could not afford an extensive library on each book of the Bible but who wanted solid guidance from scholars committed to the authority of the Holy Scriptures.

Gaebelein also wrote, "A commentary that will continue to be useful through the years should handle contemporary trends in biblical studies in such a way as to avoid becoming outdated when critical fashions change."This revision continues the EBC's exalted purpose and stands on the shoulders of the expositors of the fi rst edition, but it seeks to maintain the usefulness of the commentary by interacting with new discoveries and academic discussions.While the primary goal of this commentary is to elucidate the text and not to provide a guide to the scholarly literature about the text, the commentators critically engage recent academic discussion and provide updated bibliographies so that pastors, teachers, and students can keep abreast of modern scholarship.

Some of the commentaries in the EBC have been revised by the original author or in conjunction with a younger colleague. In other cases, scholars have been commissioned to offer fresh commentaries because the original author had passed on or wanted to pass on the baton to the next generation of evangelical scholars. Today, with commentaries on a single book of the Old and New Testaments often extending into multiple volumes, the need for a comprehensive yet succinct commentary that guides one to the gist of the text's meaning is even more pressing. The new EBC seeks to fi ll this need.

The theological stance of this commentary series remains unchanged: the

authors are committed to the divine inspiration, complete trustworthiness, and full authority of the Bible. The commentators have demonstrated profi ciency in the biblical book that is their specialty, as well as commitment to the church and the pastoral dimension of biblical interpretation. They also represent the geographical and confessional diversity that characterized the fi rst contributors.

The commentaries adhere to the same chief principle of grammatico-historical interpretation that drove the fi rst edition. In the foreword to the inaugural issue of the journal *New Testament Studies* in 1954, Matthew Black warned that "the danger in the present is that theology, with its head too high in the clouds, may end by falling into the pit of an unhistorical and uncritical dogmatism. Into any new theological undertaking must be brought all that was best in the old ideal of sound learning, scrupulous attention to philology, text and history." The dangers that Black warned against over fifty years ago have not vanished. Indeed, new dangers arise in a secular, consumerist culture that fi nds it more acceptable to use God's name in exclamations than in prayer and that encourages insipid theologies that hang in the wind and shift to tickle the ears and to meet the latest fancy. Only a solid biblical foundation can fend off these fads.

The Bible was not written for our information but for our transformation. It is not a quarry to find stones with which to batter others but to find the rock on which to build the church. It does not invite us simply to speak of God but to hear God and to confess that his Son, Jesus Christ, is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Php 2:10). It also calls us to obey his commandments (Mt 28:20). It is not a self-interpreting text, however. Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures requires sound learning and regard for history, language, and text. Exegetes must interpret not only the primary documents but all that has a bearing, direct or indirect, on the grammar and syntax, historical context, transmission, and translation of these writings.

The translation used in this commentary remains the New International Version (North American edition), but all of the commentators work from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and draw on other translations when deemed useful. The format is also very similar to the original EBC, while the design is extensively updated with a view to enhanced ease of use for the reader. Each commentary section begins with an introduction (printed in a single-column format) that provides the reader with the background necessary to understand the Bible book. Almost all introductions include a short bibliography

and an outline. The Bible text is divided into primary units that are often explained in an “Overview” section that precedes commentary on specific verses. The complete text of the New International Version is provided for quick reference, and an extensive “Commentary” section (printed in a double-column format) follows the reproducing of the text.When the Hebrew or Greek text is cited in the commentary section, a phonetic system of transliteration and translation is used.The “Notes” section (printed in a single-column format) provides a specialized discussion of key words or concepts, as well as helpful resource information. The original languages and their transliterations will appear in this section. Finally, on occasion, expanded thoughts can be found in a “Refl ections” section (printed in a double-column format) that follows the Notes section.

One additional feature is worth mentioning. Throughout this volume, wherever specific biblical words are discussed, the Goodrick-Kohlenberger (GK) numbers have been added. These numbers, which appear in the *Strongest NIV Exhaustive Concordance* and other reference tools, are based on the numbering system developed by Edward Goodrick and John Kohlenberger III and provide a system similar but superior to the Strong’s numbering system.

The editors wish to thank all of the contributors for their hard work and commitment to this project. We also deeply appreciate the labor and skill of the staff at Zondervan. It is a joy to work with them — in particular Jack Kuhatschek, Stan Gundry, Katya Covrett, Dirk Buursma, and Verlyn Verbrugge. In addition, we acknowledge with thanks the work of Connie Gundry Tappy as copy editor.

We all fervently desire that these commentaries will result not only in a deeper intellectual grasp of the Word of God but also in hearts that more profoundly love and obey the God who reveals himself to us in its pages.

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Abbreviations

Bible Texts, Versions, Etc.	
ASV	American Standard Version
AT	The Complete Bible: An American Translation (NT: E. J. Goodspeed)
Barclay	The New Testament, A New Translation
Beck	New Testament in Language of Today
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CSB	Chris tian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
GNB	Good News Bible (see also TEV)
GWT	God's Word Translation
JB	Jerusalem Bible
KJV	King James Version
Knox	Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate
LXX	Septuagint (the Greek OT)
MLB	Modern Language Bible
Moffatt	A New Translation of the Bible, James Moffatt
Montgomery	Centenary Translation of the New Testament in Modern English
MT	Masoretic Text of the OT
NA27	Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland, 27th ed.
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NEB	New English Bible
NET	New English Translation(www.netbible.com)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible

NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
Norlie	New Testament in Modern English
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Phillips	New Testament in Modern English, J. B. Phillips
REB	Revised English Bible
Rieu	Penguin Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RV	Revised Version
Samar.	Samaritan Pentateuch
Syr.	Syriac
Targ.	Targum
TCNT	Twentieth Century New Testament
TEV	Today's English Version
TNIV	Today's New International Version
UBS4	The Greek New Testament, United Bible Societies, 4th ed.
Vul.	Vulgate
Weymouth	New Testament in Modern Speech, R. F. Weymouth
Williams	The New Testament in the Language of the People, C. B. Williams

Old Testament, New Testament, Apocrypha

Ge	Genesis
Ex	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Nu	Numbers
Dt	Deuteronomy
Jos	Joshua
Jdg	Judges
Ru	Ruth
1 - 2Sa	1 - 2 Sam uel

1 - 2 Kgdms	1 - 2 Kingdoms (LXX)
1 - 2Ki	1 - 2 Kings
3 - 4 Kgdms	3 - 4 Kingdoms (LXX)
1 - 2Ch	1 - 2 Chronicles
Ezr	Ezra
Ne	Nehemiah
Est	Esther
Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalm/Psalms
Pr	Proverbs
Ecc	Ecclesiastes
SS	Song of Songs
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
La	Lamentations
Eze	Ezekiel
Da	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Am	Amos
Ob	Obadiah
Jnh	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Na	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zep	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zec	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Mt	Matthew
Mk	Mark
Lk	Luke
Jn	John

Ac	Acts
Ro	Romans
1 - 2Co	1 - 2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Php	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 - 2Th	1 - 2 Thes salo nians
1 - 2Ti	1 - 2 Tim othy
Tit	Titus
Phm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1 - 2Pe	1 - 2 Peter
1 - 2 - 3Jn	1 - 2 - 3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation
Add Esth	Additions to Esther
Add Dan	Additions to Daniel
Bar	Baruch
Bel	Bel and the Dragon
Ep Jer	Epistle of Jeremiah
1 - 2 Esd	1 - 2 Esdras
1 - 2 Macc	1 - 2 Maccabees
3 - 4 Macc	3 - 4 Maccabees
Jdt	Judith
Pr Azar	Prayer of Azariah
Pr Man	Prayer of Manasseh
Ps 151	Psalm 151
Sir	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
Sus	Susanna
Tob	Tobit
Wis	Wisdom of Solomon

Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Texts

CD	Cairo Genizah copy of the Damascus Document
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
1QapGen	Genesis Apocryphon (texts from Qumran)
1QH	or Thanksgiving Hymns (texts from Qumran)
1QIsa	Isaiah (texts from Qumran)
1QM	Milh.amm ah or War Scroll (texts from Qumran)
1QpHab	Pesher Habakkuk (texts from Qumran)
1QpMic	Pesher Micah (text from Qumran)
1QS	Serek hayyah.ad or Rule of the Community (texts from Qumran)
1QSa	Rule of the Congregation (texts from Qumran)
4QpNa	Pesher Nahum (texts from Qumran)
4QpPs	Pesher Psalms (texts from Qumran)
4QQoha,b	Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes)
4Q44 (4QDtq)	Deuteronomy (texts from Qumran)
4Q174	Florilegium (texts from Qumran)
4Q252	Commentary on Genesis A, formerly Patriarchal Blessings (texts from Qumran)
4Q394	Miqs.at Maasêa ha-Toraha (texts from Qumran)
4Q400	Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (texts from Qumran)
4Q521	Messianic Apocalypse (texts from Qumran)
4Q525	Beatitudes (texts from Qumran)
11Q13	Melchizedek (texts from Qumran)

Other Ancient Texts

Abraham	On the Life of Abraham (Philo)
Ad.	Adelphi (Terence)
Aeth.	Aethiopica (Heliodorus)
Ag.	Agamemnon (Aeschylus)
Ag. Ap.	Against Apion (Josephus)
Agr.	De Lege agraria (Cicero)
Alc.	Alcibiades (Plutarch)

Alex.	Alexander the False Prophet (Lucian)
Amic.	De amicitia (Cicero)
An.	De anima (Tertullian)
Anab.	Anabasis (Xenophon)
Ann.	Annales (Tacitus)
Ant.	Antigone (Sophocles)
Ant.	Jewish Antiquities (Josephus)
Ant.rom.	Antiquitates romanae (Dionysius of Halicarnassus)
1 Apol.	First Apology (Justin Martyr)
Apol.	Apologia (Plato, Tertullian)
Apos. Con.	Apostolic Constitutions
Ascen. Isa.	Ascension of Isaiah
As. Mos.	Assumption of Moses
Att.	Epistulae ad Atticum (Cicero)
b Abod. Zar.	bodah Zarah (Babylonian Talmud)
2 - 4 Bar.	2 - 4 Baruch
b. B. Bat.	Bava Batra (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Ber.	Berakhot (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Ketub.	Ketubbot (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Meg.	Megillah (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Ned.	Nedarim (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Pesah..	Pesah.im (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Ros ˙ Has.˙	Ros Hass˙ a˙ nah (Babylonian Talmud)
b. SaH bb.	Šabbat (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Sanh.	Sanhedrin (Babylonian Talmud)
b. SeH bu.	Šebu,ot (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Sotah	Sotah (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Taan.	Taanit (Babylonian Talmud)
b. Yebam.	Yebamot (Babylonian Talmud)
Bapt.	De baptismo (Tertullian)
Barn.	Barnabas
Ben.	De benefi ciis (Seneca)
Bibl.	Bibliotheca (Photius)

Bibl. hist.	Bibliotheca historica (Diodorus Siculus)
Bride	Advice to the Bride and Groom (Plutarch)
Cels.	Contra Celsum (Origen)
Cic.	Cicero (Plutarch)
Claud.	Divus Claudius (Suetonius)
1 - 2 Clem.	1 - 2 Clement
Comm. Dan.	Commentarium in Danielem (Hippolytus)
Comm. Jo.	Commentarii in evangelium Joannis (Origen)
Comm. Matt.	Commentarium in evangelium Matthaei (Origen)
Corrept.	De correptione et gratia (Augustine)
Cyr.	Cyropaedia (Xenophon)
Decal.	De decalogo (Philo)
Decl.	Declamationes (Quintilian)
Def. orac.	De defectu oraculorum (Plutarch)
Deipn.	Deipnosophistae (Athenaeus)
Deut. Rab.	Deuteronomy Rabbah
Dial.	Dialogus cum Tryphone (Justin Martyr)
Diatr.	Diatribai (Epictetus)
Did.	Didache
Disc.	Discourses (Epictetus)
Doctr. chr.	De doctrina christiana (Augustine)
Dom.	Domitianus (Suetonius)
Ebr.	De ebrietate (Philo)
E Delph.	De E apud Delphos (Plutarch)
1 - 2 En.	1 - 2 Enoch
Ench.	Enchiridion (Epictetus)
Ep.	Epistulae morales (Seneca)
Eph.	To the Ephesians (Ignatius)
Epist.	Epistulae (Jerome, Pliny, Hippocrates)
Ep. Tra.	Epistulae ad Trajanum (Pliny)
Eth. nic.	Ethica nichomachea (Aristotle)
Exod. Rab.	Exodus Rabbah
Fam.	Epistulae ad familiares (Cicero)

Fid. Grat.	De fide ad Gratianum (Ambrose)
Flacc.	In Flaccum (Philo)
Flight	On Flight and Finding (Philo)
Fr. Prov.	Fragmenta in Proverbia (Hippolytus)
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
Geogr.	Geographica (Strabo)
Gorg.	Gorgias (Plato)
Haer.	Adversus Haereses (Irenaeus)
Heir	Who Is the Heir? (Philo)
Hell.	Hellenica (Xenophon)
Hist.	Historicus (Polybius, Cassius Dio, Thucydides)
Hist.	Historiae (Herodotus, Tacitus)
Hist. eccl.	History of the Church (Eusebius)
Hist. Rome	The History of Rome (Livy)
Hom. Acts	Homilies on Acts (John Chrysostom)
Hom. Col.	Homilies on Colossians (John Chrysostom)
Hom. Jo.	Homilies on John (John Chrysostom)
Hom. Josh.	Homilies on Joshua (Origen)
Hom. Phil.	Homilies on Philippians (John Chrysostom)
Hom. Rom.	Homilies on Romans (John Chrysostom)
Hom. 1 Tim.	Homilies on 1 Timothy (John Chrysostom)
Hom. 2 Tim.	Homilies on 2 Timothy (John Chrysostom)
Hom. Tit.	Homilies on Titus (John Chrysostom)
Hypoth.	Hypothetica (Philo)
Inst.	Institutio oratoria (Quintilian)
Jos. Asen.	Joseph and Aseneth
Joseph	On the Life of Joseph (Philo)
Jub.	Jubilees
J.W.	Jewish War (Josephus)
L.A.E.	Life of Adam and Eve
Leg.	Legum allegoriae (Philo)
Legat.	Legatio ad Gaium (Philo)
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas

Lev. Rab.	Leviticus Rabbah
Liv. Pro.	Lives of the Prophets
m. ,Abot	,Abot (Mishnah)
m. Bek.	Bekhorot (Mishnah)
m. Ber.	Berakot (Mishnah)
m. Bik.	Bikkurim (Mishnah)
m. Git..	Git.t.in (Mishnah)
m. Mak.	Makkot (Mishnah)
m. Mid.	Middot (Mishnah)
m. Naz.	Nazir (Mishnah)
m. Ned.	Nedarim (Mishnah)
m. Nid.	Niddah (Mishnah)
m. Pesah.	Pesah.im (Mishnah)
m. SaH bb.	SaHbbat (Mishnah)
m. Sanh.	Sanhedrin (Mishnah)
m. Tamid	Tamid (Mishnah)
m. T.ehar.	T.eharot (Mishnah)
Magn.	To the Magnesians (Ignatius)
Mand.	Mandate (Shepherd of Hermas)
Marc.	Adversus Marcionem (Tertullian)
Mem.	Memorabilia (Xenophon)
Midr. Ps.	Midrash on Psalms
Migr.	De migratione Abrahami (Philo)
Mor.	Moralia (Plutarch)
Moses	On the Life of Moses (Philo)
Nat.	Naturalis historia (Pliny)
Num. Rab.	Numbers Rabbah
Onir.	Onirocritica (Artemidorus)
Or.	Orationes (Demosthenes)
Or.	Orationes (Dio Chrysostom)
Paed.	Paedagogus (Clement of Alexandria)
Peregr.	The Passing of Peregrinus (Lucian)
Pesiq. Rab.	Pesiqta Rabbati

Pesiq. Rab Kah.	Pesiqta of Rab Kahana
Phaed.	Phaedo (Plato)
Phil.	To the Philippians (Polycarp)
Phld.	To the Philadelphians (Ignatius)
Phorm.	Phormio (Terence)
Planc.	Pro Plancio (Cicero)
Plant.	De plantatione (Philo)
Pol.	Politica (Aristotle)
Pol.	To Polycarp (Ignatius)
Posterity	On the Posterity of Cain (Origen)
Praescr.	De praescriptione haereticorum (Tertullian)
Princ.	De principiis (Origen)
Prom.	Prometheus vinctus (Aeschylus)
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
Pud.	De pudicitia (Tertullian)
Pyth.	Pythionikai (Pindar)
Pyth. orac.	De Pythiae oraculis (Plutarch)
Quaest. conv.	Quaestionum convivialum libri IX(Plutarch)
Quint. fratr.	Epistulae ad Quintum fratrem(Cicero)
Rab. Perd.	Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo (Cicero)
Resp.	Respublica (Plato)
Rewards	On Rewards and Punishments(Philo)
Rhet.	Volumina rhetorica (Philodemus)
Rom.	To the Romans (Ignatius)
Rosc. com.	Pro Roscio comoedo (Cicero)
Sacrifices	On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel (Philo)
Sat.	Satirae (Horace, Juvenal)
Sera	De sera numinis vindicta (Plutarch)
Serm.	Sermones (Augustine)
Sib. Or.	Sibylline Oracles
Sim.	Similitudes (Shepherd of Hermas)
Smyrn.	To the Smyrnaeans (Ignatius)
Somn.	De somniis (Philo)

Spec.	De specialibus legibus (Philo)
Stat.	Ad populum Antiochenum de statuis(John Chrysostom)
Strom.	Stromata (Clement of Alexandria)
T. Ash.	Testament of Asher
T. Dan	Testament of Dan
T. Gad	Testament of Gad
Tg. Neof.	Targum Neofiti
Tg. Onq.	Targum Onqelos
Tg. Ps.-J.	Targum Pseudo-Jonathan
Theaet.	Theaetetus (Plato)
t. H>ul.	H>ullin (Tosefta)
t. Sanh.	Sanhedrin (Tosefta)
T. Jos.	Testament of Joseph
T. Jud.	Testament of Judah
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Mos.	Testament of Moses
T. Naph.	Testament of Naphtali
Trall.	To the Trallians (Ignatius)
T. Reu.	Testament of Reuben
Tusc.	Tusculanae disputationes (Cicero)
Verr.	In Visions (Shepherd of Hermas)Verrem (Cicero)
Virt.	De virtutibus (Philo)
Vis.	Visions (Shepherd of Hermas)
Vit. Apoll.	Vita Apollonii (Philostratus)
Vit. beat.	De vita beata (Seneca)
Vit. soph.	Vitae sophistarum (Philostratus)
y. Abod. Zar.	Abodah Zarah (Jerusalem Talmud)
y. Hag.	Hagigah (Jerusalem Talmud)
y. Šabb.	Šabbat (Jerusalem Talmud)

Journals, Periodicals, Reference Works, Series

AASOR	Annual of the American Academyof Oriental Research
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Anchor Bible Dictionary
ABR	Australian Biblical Review
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ABW	Archaeology in the Biblical World
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACNT	Augsburg Commentaries on theNew Testament
AEL	Ancient Egyptian Literature
AJBI	Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute
AJSL	American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANEP	The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
AnOr	Analecta orientalia
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
ASORMS	American Schools of Oriental Research Monograph Series
ASTI	Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute
AThR	Anglican Theological Review
AUSDDS	Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series
AUSS	Andrews University Seminary Studies
BA	Biblical Archaeologist
BAGD	Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker (2d ed.). Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature
BAR	Biblical Archaeology Review
BASOR	Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research
BBR	Bulletin for Biblical Research
BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich (3d ed.). Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature

BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs. AHebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament
BDF	Blass, Debrunner, and Funk. A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature
BEB	Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentaryon the New Testament
Ber	Berytus
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theo-logicarumlovaniensium
BGU	Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden
BI	Biblical Illustrator
Bib	Biblica
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BibS(N)	Biblische Studien (Neukirchen)
Bijdr	Bijdragen: Tijdschrit voor filosofieen theologie
BJRL	Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BKAT	Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament
BLW	Babylonian Wisdom Literature
BR	Biblical Research
BRev	Bible Review
BSac	Bibliotheca sacra
BST	The Bible Speaks Today
BT	The Bible Translator
BTB	Biblical Theology Bulletin
BWL	Babylonian Wisdom Literature
BZ	Biblische Zeitschrift
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für dieneutestamentliche Wissenschaft

CAD	Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago
CAH	Cambridge Ancient History
CahRB	Cahiers de la Revue biblique
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
CGTC	Cambridge Greek TestamentCommentary
CH	Church History
ChrT	Christianity Today
CIG	Corpus inscriptionum graecarum
CIL	Corpus inscriptionum latinarum
CJT	Canadian Journal of Theology
ConBNT	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: OldTestament Series
COS	The Context of Scripture
CTJ	Calvin Theological Journal
CTM	Concordia Theological Monthly
CTR	Criswell Theological Review
DDD	Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DRev	Downside Review
DukeDivR	Duke Divinity Review
EA	El-Amarna tablets
EBC	Expositor’s Bible Commentary
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
EcR	Ecumenical Review
EDNT	Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament
EgT	Eglise et théologie
EGT	Expositor’s Greek Testament
ErIsr	Eretz-Israel
ESCJ	Etudes sur le christianisme et le judaisme (Studies in Christianityand Judaism)

EstBib	Estudios biblicos
ETS	Evangelical Theological Society
EuroJTh	European Journal of Theology
EvQ	Evangelical Quarterly
ExAud	Ex auditu
Exeg	Exegetica
ExpTim	Expository Times
FF	Foundations and Facets
FOTL	Forms of Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion undLiteratur des Alten und NeuenTestaments
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GKC	Genesius' Hebrew Grammar
GNS	Good News Studies
GR	Greece and Rome
Grammar	A Grammar of the Greek New Testament; in the Light of Historical Research (A. T. Robertson)
GRBS	Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
HALOT	Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm. The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
HBD	HarperCollins Bible Dictionary
HBT	Horizons in Biblical Theology
Herm	Hermeneia commentary series
HeyJ	Heythrop Journal
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New TestamentCommentaries
Hor	Horizons
HS	Hebrew Studies
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommen-tarzum Neuen Testament
HTR	Harvard Theological Review
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies

HUCA	Hebrew Union College Annual
IB	Interpreter's Bible
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentaryfor Teaching and Preaching
IBS	Irish Biblical Studies
ICC	International CriticalCommentary
IDB	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
IDBSup	Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplement
IEJ	Israel Exploration Journal
IJT	Indian Journal of Theology
Int	Interpretation
Interpretation	Interpretation: A Bible Commentaryfor Teaching and Preaching
ISBE	International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, 2d ed.
IVPNTC	IVP New Testament Commentary
JAAR	Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JAARSup	JAAR Supplement Series
JANESCU	Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society at Columbia University
JAOS	Journal of the American Oriental Society
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JBMW	Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood
Jeev	Jeevadhara
JETS	Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
JNES	Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JNSL	Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages
JPOS	Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JQR	Jewish Quarterly Review
JRS	Journal of Roman Studies
JRT	Journal of Religious Thought
JSNT	Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSNTSup	JSNT Supplement Series

JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOTSup	JSOT Supplement Series
JSP	Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha
JSS	Journal of Semitic Studies
JTC	Journal for Theology and the Church
JTS	Journal of Theological Studies
K &D	Keil and Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KTU	Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit
L &N	Louw and Nida. Greek-EnglishLexicon of the New Testament:Based on Semantic Domains
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LS	Louvain Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Scott, and Jones. A Greek-English Lexicon
MM	Moulton and Milligan. The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament
NAC	New American Commentary
NBD	New Bible Dictionary, 2d ed.
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
Neot	Neotestamentica
NewDocs	New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity
NIBC	New International BiblicalCommentary
NICNT	New International Commentaryon the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIDNTT	New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
NIDOTTE	New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis
NIGTC	New International Greek TestamentCommentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NIVSB	Zondervan NIV Study Bible

Notes	Notes on Translation
NovT	Novum Testamentum
NovTSup	Novum TestamentumSupplements
NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NTC	New Testament Commentary(Baker)
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTS	New Testament Studies
NTT	New Testament Theology
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
OJRS	Ohio Journal of Religious Studies
OLA	Orientalia lovaniensia analecta
Or	Orientalia (NS)
OTG	Old Testament Guides
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	Old Testament Studies
OtSt	Oudtestamentische Studien
Parab	Parabola
PEGLMBS	Proceedings, Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Bible Societies
PEQ	Palestine Exploration Quarterly
PG	Patrologia graeca
PL	Patrologia latina
PNTC	Pillar New TestamentCommentary
Presb	Presbyterion
PresR	Presbyterian Review
PRSt	Perspectives in Religious Studies
PTMS	Pittsburgh Theological Mono-graphSeries
PTR	Princeton Theological Review
RB	Revue biblique
RBibLit	Review of Biblical Literature
RefJ	Reformed Journal
RelSRev	Religious Studies Review

ResQ	Restoration Quarterly
RevExp	Review and Expositor
RHPR	Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses
RTR	Reformed Theological Review
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SBJT	Southern Baptist Journal of Theology
SBK	Strack and Billerbeck, Kommentarzum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash
SBLDS	Society of Biblical LiteratureDissertation Series
SBLSP	Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical LiteratureWritings from the Ancient World
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
ScEccl	Sciences ecclésiastiques
ScEs	Science et esprit
ScrHier	Scripta hierosolymitana
SE	Studia evangelica
SEÅ	Svensk exegetisk årsbok
SEG	Supplementum epigraphicum graecum
Sem	Semitica
SJLA	Studies in Judaism of Late Antiquity
SJT	Scottish Journal of Theology
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society for New TestamentStudies Monograph Series
SNTSU	Studien zum Neuen Testamentund seiner Umwelt
SP	Sacra Pagina
SR	Studies in Religion
ST	Studia theologica
Str-B	Strack, H. L., and P. Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch
StudBT	Studia biblica et theologica
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
SVF	Stoicorum veterum fragmenta

SwJT	Southwestern Journal of Theology
TA	Tel Aviv
TBT	The Bible Today
TDNT	Kittel and Friedrich. TheologicalDictionary of the New Testament
TDOT	Botterweck and Ringgren.Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament
Text	Textus
TF	Theologische Forschung
THAT	Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament
Them	Themelios
ThEv	Theologia Evangelica
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentarzum Neuen Testament
ThTo	Theology Today
TJ	Trinity Journal
TLNT	Theological Lexicon of the New Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New TestamentCommentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old TestamentCommentaries
TS	Theological Studies
TWOT	Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament
TynBul	Tyndale Bulletin
TZ	Theologische Zeitschrift
UBD	Unger’s Bible Dictionary
UF	Ugarit-Forschungen
VE	Vox evangelica
VT	Vetus Testamentum
VTSup	Supplements to VetusTestamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographienzum Alten und Neuen Testament
WTJ	Westminster Theological Journal
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchun-genzum Neuen Testament
WW	Word and World

YCS	Yale Classical Studies
ZAW	Zeitschrift für die alttestamentlicheWissenschaft
ZDPV	Zeitschrift des deutschen PalästinaVereins
ZNW	Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älterern Kirche
ZPEB	Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible
ZWT	Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie

General

AD	anno Domini (in the year of [our] Lord)
Akkad.	Akkadian
Arab.	Arabic
Aram.	Aramaic
BC	before Christ
ca.	circa (around, about, approximately)
cf.	confer, compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
d.	died
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
e.g.	exempli gratia, for example
esp.	especially
et al.	et alii, and others
EV	English versions of the Bible
f(f).	and the following one(s)
fig.	figuratively
Gk.	Greek
GK	Goodrick & Kohlenberger numbering system
Heb.	Hebrew
ibid.	ibidem, in the same place
i.e.	id est, that is
Lat.	Latin
lit.	literally
MS(S)	manuscript(s)

n(n).	note(s)
n.d.	no date
NS	New Series
p(p).	page(s)
par.	parallel (indicates textualparallels)
para.	paragraph
repr.	reprinted
rev.	revised
s.v.	sub verbo, under the word
Syr.	Syriac
TR	Textus Receptus (Greek text of the KJV translation)
trans.	translator, translated by
v(v).	verse(s)
vs.	versus

PROVERBS

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Introduction

1. **Background**
2. **Authorship and Date**
3. **Literary Forms**
4. **Theological Value**
5. **Canon and Text**
6. **Bibliography**
7. **Outline**
8. **Topical Index**

1. BACKGROUND

The book of Proverbs is a marvelous collection of wise sayings and instructions for living a useful and effective life. The collection forms part of the larger group of biblical writings known as Wisdom Literature. This literature gives instructions for living while pondering the difficulties of life. Proverbial wisdom is characterized by short, pithy statements; but speculative wisdom, such as Ecclesiastes or Job, uses lengthy monologues and dialogues to probe the meaning of life, the problem of good and evil, and the relationship between God and people.[1]

The genre of wisdom literature was common in the ancient world, and a copious amount of material comes from ancient Egypt.[2] From the Old Kingdom (2686 – 2160 BC) we find pieces of wisdom in the "Instruction of Kagemni" and the " Instruction of Ptah-hotep" (2450 BC), which advise the proper decorum for a court official. As in Proverbs, Ptah-hotep counsels on persuasive speech: "Good speech is more hidden than the emerald, but it may be found with maidservants at the grindstones."[3] He further warns against going after a woman like a fool, for "one attains death through knowing her."[4] The "Instruction of Merikare" (2160 – 2040 BC) records a monarch's advice for his son on the wise qualities needed by a king, including this saying: "The tongue is a sword . . . and speech is more valorous than any fighting."[5]

In the New Kingdom period (1580 – 1100 BC), the "Instruction of

Amenemope" stands out. Amen-emope instructs his son regarding proper conduct. This work, arranged in thirty sections, contains many instructions that are similar in form and content to various laws of the Pentateuch and teachings of Proverbs. These instructions are generally seen as forming the background of Proverbs 22:17 – 24:22.Although the two collections are not identical, they are similar enough to attest direct influence. General knowledge of wisdom sayings across the ancient Near East as well as specific interchange between Egypt and Solomon's court make a literary connection likely. Because of the dates involved, it is unlikely that Amenemope borrowed from Solomon.

Similar teachings in the Pentateuch might suggest a greater antiquity for biblical wisdom sayings, but there is insufficient material to draw a firm conclusion. Many ancient laws, sayings, songs, poetic couplets, and proverbs found their way into inspired Scripture. Inspiration does not exclude the divine use of existing material; but in Scripture it takes on a new force, a higher meaning, and becomes authoritative.

In the "Instruction of Amenemope" morality is defined as what is pleasing to the god, and it forms the basis for life and prosperity. For example, the instructions include the following:

> Do not associate to thyself the heated man,
> Nor visit him for conversation (cf. Pr 22:24).[6]
> Do not strain to seek an excess, When thy needs are safe for thee.
> If riches are brought to thee by robbery . . . .
> (Or) they have made themselves wings like geese
> And are flown away to the heavens (cf. Pr 23:4 – 5).[7]

After "Amenemope," wisdom literature again surfaces with the "Instruction of Ani" (ca. 1100 BC). Here a father instructs his son about personal piety, ritual purity, and appropriate speech. He enjoins fulfillment of religious and filial obligations, good manners, generosity, and reserve in speech; and he warns against adultery, clamor, and presumption before the god. He says, "Be on your guard against a woman from abroad . . . a woman who is far away from her husband. . . . She has no witnesses when she waits to ensnare thee."[8] Much later there is the "Instruction of ,Oncheheshongy" (ca. 400 – 300 BC), a large collection of about five hundred sayings and proverbs like those in Proverbs that reflect the practical and religious concerns of the community. But they do not

have the poetic parallelism characteristic of Hebrew proverbs. For example, their instructions include: “Do not go to your brother if you are in trouble, go to your friend”(cf. Pr 27:10); and “Better [to have] a statue for a son than a fool” (cf. 17:21).[9]

Mesopotamia also had collections of proverbial material.[10]The “Instruction of Shuruppak” (ca. 2000 BC) records the advice of a king to his son Ziusudra, the hero of the flood in the Sumerian version. For example, it says, “My son, let me give you instructions, may you pay attention to them,” and “[My] son, do not sit [alone] in a [chamber] with someone’s wife.”[11]

The “Counsels of Wisdom” (ca. 1500 – 1000 BC) are a collection of moral exhortations about avoiding bad company and careless speech, being kind to the needy, and living in harmony with one’s neighbor and in loyalty to the king. For example, it says,

> Do not return evil to your adversary;
> Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you,
> Maintain justice for your enemy.[12]

The “Words of Ahiqar” (700 – 670 BC) is a collection of proverbs, riddles, short fables, and religious observations by a court official for the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon; the work gives advice on disciplining children, guarding the tongue, respecting secrets, and being circumspect in dealing with the king. For example, it says, “Withhold not thy son from the rod” (cf. Pr 13:24); and, “I have lifted sand, and I have carried salt; but there is naught which is heavier than [grief]” (cf. 27:3).[13]

Thus Proverbs has affinities with literature from other countries, and the Bible itself alludes to the wisdom of Egypt and Mesopotamia (1Ki 4:30; Da 1:4, 17, 20).This literary background is helpful in understanding the biblical book. First, these other works provide help in understanding the forms of wisdom literature — proverbs, maxims, fables, riddles, allegories, and instructions. Second, it indicates the antiquity of the forms used in the Bible, especially Proverbs 1 – 9, which was once considered to be the latest form. But it now can be demonstrated that the literary proverb of two lines may be as old as the Sumerian proverbs and that collected instructions may be as old as the Old Kingdom of Egypt.

In making these comparisons, commentators find help in dating the various collections within the book of Proverbs. Kitchen, for example, has argued for the plausibility of the Solomonic date of Proverbs 1:1 – 24:34 on the basis of its similarities with the genre of instruction demonstrated in the first part of the second millennium. This form includes a title (cf. 1:1); statement of purpose (cf. 1:2 – 7); lengthy prologue exhorting and encouraging compliance to instruction (cf. 1:8 – 9:18); and collection of maxims, proverbs, precepts, and admonitions (10:1 – 22:16). Kitchen also argues for the early inclusion of 22:17 – 24:34 based on the dating of the "Instruction of Amenemope."[14]

In addition to this comparison with the great collections of wise instructions, there is also value to be gained from tracing similar concepts. For example, paralleling the Hebrew concept of wisdom is the Egyptian presentation of *maᶜat*-at — a fixed, eternal religious order, manifested in the stability of nature, justice in society, and the integrity of the individual's life.[15] Another concept found in both Hebrew and Egyptian literature is the rhetorical use of personification to convey abstract concepts such as intelligence, understanding, justice, and skill. The biblical figure of personified wisdom (Pr 8) corresponds to the personification of *maᶜat*-at in Egyptian art and literature.

Finally, many specific emphases in Proverbs find parallels in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. But even though the collections share some of the same interests, the biblical material is unique in its prerequisite of a personal faith in a personal God. To the Hebrews the success of wisdom did not simply require compliance with wise instructions but also trust in, reverence for, and submission to the Lord (Pr 1:7;3:5 – 6; 9:10), who created everything and governs both the world of nature and human history (3:19 – 20;16:4; 21:1). Any ancient wisdom used by the Hebrews had to harmonize with this religious worldview, and any ancient wisdom used in this collection took on greater significance when subordinated to the true faith.

The biblical writers occasionally used literary forms and expressions that were common to their culture.While the fullness of the Yahwistic faith in all its distinctions came by direct revelation, God did include Semitic customs, standard laws, treaty forms, poetic expressions, and wise sayings that were compatible with the truth and useful in the communications of the divine will. One may speculate how and when concepts such as wisdom, justice, and

holiness, or sacrifice, sanctuary, and priesthood — to name but a few — found their place in primitive societies. But apart from that speculation, to recognize the biblical texts as divine revelation does not necessarily mean that all of their contents had to be comprised of previously unknown information. On the contrary, before many of these facts and concepts were written down, they were passed on verbally from generation to generation and consequently could have circulated over vast distances and found their way into many diverse cultures; therefore, whatever the Spirit of God inspired the ancient writers to include became a part of the word of the Lord. Such inclusions then took on a new and greater meaning when they formed part of Scripture; in a word, they became authoritative and binding, part of the communication of the divine will.

Likely the writers deliberately used well-known concepts and expressions from the pagan world to subordinate them to the true religion. For example, while *maʿat-* was a deity of justice and order in Egypt, no such deity existed in Israel. Rather, *ḥokmâ*(“wisdom”; GK 2683) was personified and spoke its message in the first person — something *maʿat-*at did not do. By incorporating wise sayings and motifs (in addition to producing new and unparalleled sayings) and investing them with higher religious value, the Hebrew sages were in a sense putting new wine into old wineskins. They could forcefully teach, then, that true wisdom was from above and not from below.

2. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The traditional view that Solomon wrote the entire book of Proverbs is supported by the titles in 1:1; 10:1;and 25:1. Moreover, Solomon was a wise man, writing proverbs and collecting sayings from other wise men (see 22:17 – 24:34). Proponents of this view have also frequently assumed that Agur (30:1) and Lemuel (31:1) were pseudonyms of Solomon.

This general view, however, stands in need of some revision. It is now recognized that Agur and Lemuel were probably not pseudonyms for Solomon and that 22:17 – 24:34 forms a separate collection of proverbs, for it has a distinct form, bears a separate title and purpose, and seems to be directly related to the “Instruction of Amenemope.” It is impossible to determine who added this material to the collection of Proverbs.Furthermore, on closer examination the title of 1:1, which has generally been taken to head up 1:8 – 9:18, may not

actually refer to these chapters; it may simply be the heading for the whole book in its final form and may not necessarily indicate that the first nine chapters are from Solomon.

It is unreasonable, however, to deny that the largest portions of the proverbs are Solomon's, as older critical scholars often did. Otto Eissfeldt is only willing to say that "one or another of the sayings" is Solomon's and that "one or another of the quite small collections" goes back to Solomon.[16]More and more scholars, however, acknowledge that the earlier period is an appropriate setting for the composition and collection of such wisdom sayings. The age of Solomon was characterized by national consolidation, the organization and development of the temple staff, and the collection of traditional literary works, including wisdom sayings. It was also a period of broad international exchange; for through his many alliances and trade contracts, Solomon would have had scribes of foreign lands in his courts. It is easy to see how similarities between Proverbs and other ancient Near Eastern literature could have developed.

Yet it is not possible to date the book of Proverbs only on the basis of literary style or content. All the literary forms and perhaps the overall structure can be demonstrated in early parallels as well as late parallels. [17] In addition, the same sociological, theological, and educational background can be demonstrated for much of the wisdom literature in the ancient Near East. The instruction frequently came from a royal father concerned with preparing his son to replace him in court and teaching self-control in temperament, speech, and action so that his son might be successful. Also, the theology of Proverbs is consistent with the theology of the Law and the Prophets, thus making parallel references as a basis for dating rather difficult. [18] Moreover, even the earlier attempts to parallel motifs, such as the personification of wisdom with later Greek philosophical thought, are no longer definite, for examples of such personification have been discovered all over the ancient world.[19]

An examination of the titles of the book is important to the study of its authorship.The heading in 10:1 clearly credits Solomon for the subsequent material. In 10:1 – 22:16 there may be two collections (chs. 10 – 15; 16:1 – 22:16) — a determination based on differences in style (the second collection has greater variety of parallelism). The heading in 25:1 also affirms that Solomon was the author (or editor) of a larger collection from which the scribes

of Hezekiah's court excerpted the proverbs in chs. 25 – 29.There are also differences of style between chs. 25 – 27 and chs. 28 – 29, the former having more illustrative parallelism and more grouping of topics.

The title in 1:1 has been taken variously as the heading (1) to the book as a whole, (2) to 1:1 – 9:18, and (3) to other delimited sections, such as 1:1 – 24:34.[20] The title probably cannot be limited to 1:1 – 9:18, for then we might have expected the heading in 10:1 to be like that in 25:1 —"these *also* are the proverbs of Solomon."[21]In addition, the term *mišlê* ("proverbs"; GK 5442) does not describe any of the sayings in 1:8 – 9:18; so the title is inappropriate if specifically introducing just that section. Finally, 1:2 – 7, which belongs with the heading of 1:1 by its grammatical construction, best expresses the general purpose of the whole collection; as an introduction it forms part of the prologue (1:1 – 9:18) to the major collection of 10:1 – 24:34.

This introductory section (1:1 – 7), however, may have functioned as the introduction to an earlier collection as well. Since the expression "the proverbs of Solomon" fits the dominant form found in the collections of 10:1 – 22:16 and 25:1 – 29:27, the introduction of 1:1 – 7 may have formerly introduced a collection now found in 10:1 – 31:31.Yet, since there seems to be no reason for dating 1:8 – 9:18 any later than the first Solomonic collection, this prologue may have been written for the core collection.

There are also titles in the book that are non-Solomonic. Any borrowing that took place may have been based on firsthand knowledge of the Egyptian material.[22] This dependence, confined to similarity of concepts and similarity of figures and not to precise wording, seems to be limited to 22:17 – 23:11. Since "Instruction of Amenemope" dates from at least as early as 1100 BC, the time could fit the Solomonic era.Scott thinks this Egyptian document was still being copied centuries later and "may well have been studied during his training by an Israelite scribe of the prophetic period."[23]

The title in 31:1 credits Lemuel with the sayings that follow. Although the NIV translates *massaa* ,m as "an oracle," it may be that it refers to a kingdom named "Massa" that is attested in the annals of the Assyrian kings from the time of Hezekiah (roughly 715 – 687 BC). The poem in 31:10 – 31 has no heading and cannot be readily connected with Lemuel. The heading of 30:1, "the sayings

of Agur son of Jakeh — an oracle [‘of Massa’; NIV margin],” is also obscure. These issues will be discussed in the commentary.

In conclusion, then, Solomon is responsible for 10:1 – 22:16 and perhaps all or part of chs. 25 – 29.Most scholars, including many conservatives, see some dependence of 22:17 – 24:34 on the “Instruction of Amenemope.” The nature of this dependence is debatable, but it may be that Israel knew these sayings by the time of Solomon. Most scholars also see chs. 30 – 31 as non-Solomonic and from a later date, perhaps from a time contemporary with Hezekiah.[24]The prologue to the book (1:8 – 9:18) may have been added to form an introduction, certainly by the time of Hezekiah, and possibly in Solomon’s time. But a final editor may have put it all together during the Persian period (540 – 322 BC) or later, carefully safeguarding the traditional collections. The old title and introductory purpose (1:1 – 7) then headed up the final collection.

3. LITERARY FORMS

A casual reading of Proverbs reveals the general form of a proverb. A proverb, as Scott says, is a short, pregnant sentence or phrase whose meaning is applicable in many situations.[25]A thorough analysis of the proverbs reveals that these short sayings follow many patterns and constructions that bear on the meanings.

As with all Hebrew poetic discourse, the proverbs use the different types of parallelism.

- *Synonymous* parallelism expresses one idea in parallel but slightly different expressions: “A fool’s mouth is his undoing, / and his lips are a snare to his soul” (18:7).
- In *antithetical* parallelism the second line contrasts with the first: “The plans of the righteous are just, / but the advice of the wicked is deceitful” (12:5).This type of parallelism is the most common in the book; in 12:5 it sets before the reader the wise and profitable way and the foolish and disastrous way.
- *Emblematic* parallelism uses a figurative illustration as one of the parallel units: “As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, / so is a sluggard to those who send him” (10:26).
- Another category used in earlier commentaries is the general one of

synthetic parallelism, applied to passages in which the second line amplifies the first in some way: “The LORD works out everything for his own ends — / even the wicked for a day of disaster” (16:4). Because this category always required the interpreter to explain the specific way the parallelism worked, more recent scholarship prefers to use more precise categories. There is *progressive* or *consequential* parallelism, in which the second line describes an action that chronologically or logically follows what precedes; there is *specifying* parallelism, in which the second line specifies how a preceding general statement is realized; and there is *complementary* parallelism, in which the second line can provide a perspective that is complementary to the preceding statement.[26] Whatever label is given to this category, the expositor still must explain clearly how the parallelism works.

- The final category is proverbs whose second line simply completes the idea begun in the first, exhibiting *formal* parallelism. One part may contain the subject and the second the predicate (15:31); the first line may state a condition and the second the consequences (16:7), its cause (16:12), or its purpose (15:24); and one part may state a preferred value or course over another: “Better a little with the fear of the LORD / than great wealth with turmoil” (15:16).

Proverbs are essentially didactic, whether they follow the pattern of a formal instruction using imperatives or prohibitions (16:3; 23:9), are expressed in didactic sayings that observe traits and acts to be followed or avoided (14:31), tell an example story (7:6 – 23), make a wisdom speech (8:1 – 36), or develop numerical sayings (6:16 – 19).

Instructions, whether commands or admonitions, use motivations — reasons for complying. The most common form of motivation is a subordinate clause stating the purpose, result, or reason for the instruction: “Listen to advice and accept instruction, / and in the end you will be wise” (19:20). Sometimes the motivation is implied in the general observation: “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline / and do not resent his rebuke, / because the LORD disciplines those he loves, / as a father the son he delights in” (3:11 – 12).

In general proverbs draw lessons by reflecting on the way things are in relation to right values and right conduct. Scott lists seven ways the book draws these lessons: proverbs may present (1) things that appear distinct but are similar (14:4a); (2) things that seem the same but are different (27:7b); (3) things that

are similar (using similes, as in 25:25); (4) things that are absurd or futile (17:16); (5) sayings that classify types of people (14:15); (6) sayings that indicate relative values (27:3); and (7) sayings that set forth consequences (27:18).[27]

Finally, it should be noted that the structure of the entire book uses different forms. Proverbs 1:8 – 9:18 appears to be an organized introduction to the book with many admonitions and prohibitions as well as example stories and personified wisdom speech. This section runs in cycles: the purpose of Proverbs is to give wisdom (1:1 – 7), but folly may interrupt this purpose (1:8 – 33); there are advantages to seeking wisdom (2:1 – 4:27), but folly may prevent one from seeking it (5:1 – 6:19); there are advantages to finding wisdom (6:20 – 9:12), but folly may prevent one's finding it (9:13 – 18).

Proverbs 10:1 – 22:16 is a collection of some 375 seemingly unrelated proverbs. Then, following the sayings patterned after the "Instruction of Amenemope" (22:17 – 24:22), another collection of proverbs is included (chs. 25 – 29).The last two chapters include among other things the numerical sayings of the wise (30:10 – 33) and the acrostic poem on wisdom (31:10 – 31). Although these collections appear to be randomly gathered, recent studies into the technical elements of the poetry indicate that there is a more skillful composition involved. Some have sought to understand the material by numerical considerations, as in wisdom's seven pillars, or in the numerical value of the Hebrew name "Solomon" (the numerical value of the letters adds up to 375, the number of proverbs in the Solomonic collections). But these explanations are not entirely convincing and do not explain the actual construction of the verses.

More helpful approaches use the vocabulary and the forms in rhetorical criticism to understand the arrangement. For example, following the pattern of the first collection (the title and preamble [1:1 – 7], the prologue [1:8 – 8:36], and the epilogue [9:1 – 18]), many have seen parallels in the second collection (10:1 – 22:16). This section also has a title, followed by a lengthy section contrasting wisdom and folly, including a section on the unfaithful wife. The units within this collection may further be marked off by specific vocabulary, types of sayings, and themes; thus it can be divided into two units, chs. 10 – 15 and 16:1 – 22:16. The heart of this collection (chs. 15 and 16) contains an

emphasis on the sayings of the Lord.

The analysis of the other collections of proverbs may also be analyzed by the types of proverbs and their distinct emphases. All such studies do show that at work was a carefully planned structure. However, the various proposals for the analysis of the structure are not always convincing and not always readily observable to the reader of Proverbs. A dedication to the technical aspects of the language and poetics of the book is required to uncover how the material has been put together. But this detailed analysis should enhance the understanding of the meanings of the proverbs and not become an end in itself.[28]

4. THEOLOGICAL VALUE

This collection of wise sayings is not exclusively religious; its teachings apply to human problems in general, not primarily to the problems of the religious community or to major theological themes such as election, redemption, and covenant. Rather, the teacher of wisdom "concerns himself with people as plain, ordinary individuals who live in the world, and with the wisdom and folly of their attitudes and actions in the common things of life."[29]

Accordingly, the sayings exhibit several distinctive characteristics. First, they focus attention on individuals rather than on the nation by setting forth the qualities needed and the dangers to be avoided by people seeking to find access with God. Second, they are applicable to all people, at any period in history, who face the same types of perils and have the same characteristics and abilities (1:20; 8:1 – 5). Third, they are based on respect for authority, traditional values and teachings, and the wisdom of mature teachers (24:21). Fourth, they are immensely practical, (1) giving sound advice for developing personal qualities necessary to achieve success in this life and avoid failure or shame, and (2) warning that though virtue is rewarded by prosperity and well-being, vice leads to poverty and disaster.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Proverbs is a secular book; its teachings are solidly based on "the fear of the LORD" (1:7), thus making compliance with them in reality a moral and spiritual matter. In fact, the book teaches that this fear of the Lord is the evidence of faith, for the wise teacher enjoins people to trust in the Lord, whose counsel stands (19:21), and not their

own understanding (3:5 – 7).The purpose of proverbial teaching, then, is to inspire faith in the Lord (22:19).

Such reverential fear requires a personal knowledge of the Lord ("fear" and "knowledge" are parallel in 9:10); to find this fear is to find knowledge (2:5) — a knowledge that comes by revelation (3:6). Ultimately, however, the fear of the Lord is manifested in a life of obedience, confessing and forsaking sin (28:18) and doing what is right (21:3), which is the believer's task before God (17:3). Since the motivation for faith and obedience comes from Scripture, Proverbs relates the way of wisdom to the law (28:4; 29:18). In the final analysis we must conclude with Plaut, "There are no 'secular' proverbs which can be contrasted with 'religious' ones; everything on earth serves the purposes of God and is potentially holy."[30]

According to Jeremiah 18:18, prophets, priests, and sages molded the cultural life of Israel, the sages being an ancient and influential group (Isa 29:14). In the early days their wisdom was probably declared in the gates for all to hear (Job 29:7 – 25). Their teachings were preeminently concerned with truth that had stood the test of experience — it had to ring true.[31]They classified people into two groups — those who were wise, who possessed moral qualities to which wisdom makes her moral appeal, and those who were deficient in the same.[32]Accordingly, the teachings of Proverbs are of the highest ethical quality, for they relate virtue to the will of God. The disaster that comes as a result of folly and vice is part of divine retribution — a more immediate concern than the question of immortality.

Finally, the religious value of the book is endorsed by its being in the canon. Jesus himself recognized the wisdom of Solomon recorded in Scripture as evidence of its place in the developing plan of redemption. But that revealed plan ultimately led to Christ himself, who in all points is greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42). Chris tians may certainly draw inspiration and instruction from the book of Proverbs, but they have the wisdom of Christ as God's final word.

5. CANON AND TEXT

The book of Proverbs appears in the Jewish lists of the books of the canon (e.g., in Josephus's lists and in the talmudic tractate *Baba Bathra*) and is commonly

cited as authoritative scripture in the *Mishnah* .The NT quotes Proverbs various times (Mt 16:27 [Pr 24:12]; Ro 3:15 [Pr 1:16]; 12:16 [Pr 3:7], 20 [Pr 25:21 – 22];Heb 12:5 – 6 [Pr 3:11 – 12]; Jas 4:6 [Pr 3:34], 13 [Pr 27:1]; 1Pe 2:17 [Pr 24:21]; 4:8 [Pr 10:12], 18 [Pr 11:31];5:5 [Pr 3:34]; 2Pe 2:22 [Pr 26:11]). So the book is unquestionably an integral part of the Holy Scriptures. It was placed in the last section of the Hebrew canon, the *Kethubim* ("Writings"), but it occupies different positions in different lists. According to the rabbinic literature, Proverbs follows Psalms and Job (*b. B. Bat.* 14b, 15a); but the LXX grouped Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon on the basis of their authorship.

The Hebrew text is arguably in fair condition. Where the LXX differs in a number of places, the MT is usually far more satisfying. Harrison estimates about twenty-five difficult readings in the Hebrew, along with some obscure words.[33]But the LXX has greater problems. It is close to the Hebrew in chs. 1 – 9, but in chs. 10 – 31 the differences are great.The LXX retains the title in 1:1, omits the title in 10:1, and changes the titles in 30:1 and 31:1. Throughout the book the LXX adds certain proverbs (which may be from a different Hebrew Vorlage [underlying text]) but deletes others. Moreover, the position of 30:1 – 31:9 differs in the Greek (30:1 – 14 is placed after 24:22, and 30:15 – 33 and 31:1 – 9 are placed after ch. 24). Possibly, separate traditions of these chapters were in existence with different orders; but it is also possible that the arrangement was the resolution of the LXX to show Solomonic authorship.[34]

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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7. OUTLINE

I. Introduction to the Book of Proverbs (1:1 – 7)

A. Title: The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1)
B. Purposes: To Develop Moral Skill and Mental Acumen (1:2 – 6)
C. Motto: The Fear of the Lord (1:7)

II. A Father’s Admonition to Acquire Wisdom (1:8 – 9:18)

A. Introductory Exhortation (1:8 – 9)
B. Admonition to Avoid Easy but Unjust Riches (1:10 – 19)
C. Warning against Disregarding or Despising Wisdom (1:20 – 33)
D. The Benefits of Seeking Wisdom (2:1 – 22)
  1. The Admonition to Receive Wisdom (2:1 – 4)
  2. Consequences of Receiving Wisdom (2:5 – 22)
    a. Knowledge of God and His Protection (2:5 – 8)
    b. Moral Discernment (2:9 – 22)
      i. Discernment for Living (2:9 – 11)
      ii. Protection from Evil Men (2:12 – 15)
      iii. Protection from the Evil Woman (2:16 – 19)
      iv. Enablement for Righteous Living (2:20 – 22)
E. Admonition to Follow the Way of Wisdom in Relationships with God and People (3:1 – 35)
  1. Introductory Exhortation (3:1 – 4)
  2. Admonition to Be Faithful to the Lord (3:5 – 12)
  3. Commendation of the Way of Wisdom (3:13 – 26)
    a. Wisdom the Most Valuable Possession (3:13 – 18)
    b. Wisdom Essential to Creation (3:19 – 20)
    c. Wisdom and a Long and Safe Life (3:21 – 26)
  4. Warning to Avoid Unneighborliness (3:27 – 30)

5. Warning against Emulating the Wicked (3:31 – 35)

F. Admonition to Follow Righteous ness and Avoid Wickedness (4:1 – 27)
1. Traditional Teaching and Its Benefits (4:1 – 9)
a. Exhortation to Acquire Traditional Wisdom (4:1 – 4a)
b. Benefits of Acquired Wisdom (4:4b – 9)
2. Admonition to Live Righ teously (4:10 – 19)
a. Pursuit of a Righ teous Lifestyle (4:10 – 13)
b. Avoidance of a Wicked Lifestyle (4:14 – 19)
3. Admonition to Concentrate on Righ teous Living (4:20 – 27)
a. Exhortation to the Father's Teaching (4:20 – 22)
b. Concentration on Righteous ness (4:23 – 27)

G. Admonition to Avoid Seduction (5:1 – 23)
1. A Father's Warning about Deadly Seduction (5:1 – 6)
a. Exhortation for Discretion (5:1 – 2)
b. Motivation: With Wisdom Seduction May Be Avoided (5:3 – 6)
2. A Father's Warning to Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:7 – 14)
a. Exhortation for Prevention (5:7 – 8)
b. Motivation: Obedience Will Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:9 – 14)
3. Advice to Find Satisfaction at Home (5:15 – 23)
a. Avoid Sharing Love with Strangers (5:15 – 17)
b. Finding Satisfaction with One's Wife (5:18 – 19)
c. Motivation: Adultery is Sinful Folly (5:20 – 23)

H. Admonition to Seek Release from a Foolish Indebtedness (6:1 – 5)
1. Conditions of Indebtedness (6:1 – 2)
2. Exhortation to Obtain Release (6:3 – 5)

I. Admonition to Avoid Laziness (6:6 – 11)
1. Lesson in Diligence (6:6 – 8)
2. Danger of Poverty (6:9 – 11)

J. Warning against Deviousness (6:12 – 15)
1. Description (6:12 – 14)
2. Destruction (6:15)

K. Conduct the Lord Hates (6:16 – 19)
1. Introductory Statement (6:16)
2. Delineation (6:17 – 19)

L. Warning about Immorality (6:20 – 35)
1. Reminder to Heed Instruction (6:20 – 24)
2. Warning to Avoid Seduction (6:25 – 35)

M. Admonition to Avoid the Wiles of the Adulteress (7:1 – 27)
1. Important Teaching of the Father (7:1 – 5)

2. Description of Seduction (7:6 – 23)
a. The Victim (7:6 – 9)
b. The Temptress (7:10 – 12)
c. The Seduction (7:13 – 20)
d. The Capitulation (7:21 – 23)
3. Deadly Results of Consorting (7:24 – 27)

N. The Appeal of Wisdom (8:1 – 36)
1. Introduction (8:1 – 3)
2. First Cycle (8:4 – 9)
a. Invitation: Listen and Gain Understanding (8:4 – 5)
b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Noble, Just, and True (8:6 – 9)
3. Second Cycle (8:10 – 21)
a. Invitation: Receive Instruction and Knowledge (8:10)
b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Valuable (8:11 – 21)
4. Third Cycle (8:22 – 36)
a. Motivation: Wisdom Preceded and Delights in Creation (8:22 – 31)
b. Invitation: Listen to Wisdom and Be Blessed (8:32 – 36)

O. Consequences of Accepting the Invitations of Wisdom or Folly (9:1 – 18)
1. Accepting Wisdom (9:1 – 12)
a. Invitation to Wisdom (9:1 – 6)
i. Preparations for the Invitation (9:1 – 3)
ii. Wisdom's Invitation (9:4 – 6)
b. Description of Responses (9:7 – 11)
i. The Scoffer (9:7 – 8a)
ii. The Wise Man (9:8b – 11)
c. Consequence: Reward (9:12)
2. Accepting the Invitation of Folly (9:13 – 18)
a. Invitation (9:13 – 17)
i. Situation of the Invitation (9:13 – 15)
ii. Invitation (9:16 – 17)
b. Consequence: Death (9:18)

III. The First Collection of Solomonic Proverbs, Part I (10:1 – 15:29)

IV. The First Collection of Solomonic Proverbs, Part II (15:30 – 22:16)

V. The Sayings of the Wise (22:17 – 24:34)

A. Thirty Precepts of the Sages (22:17 – 24:22)

1. Introductory Call to Attention (22:17 – 21)
2. The Thirty Sayings (22:22 – 24:22)

B. Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23 – 34)

VI. Proverbs of Solomon Collected by Hezekiah (25:1 – 29:27)
(For a more detailed treatment of chapters 10 – 29, see the Topical Index.)

VII. The Words of Agur (30:1 – 33)

A. The Title (30:1)

B. Agur's Confession and Petition (30:2 – 9)

1. Confession of Ignorance (30:2 – 4)
2. Affi rmation of the Reliability of God's Word (30:5 – 6)
3. Prayer (30:7 – 9)

C. The Admonition of Agur (30:10 – 33)

1. Noninterference in Domestic Situations (30:10)
2. Four Evil Things (30:11 – 14)
3. Insatiable Things (30:15 – 16)
4. Punishment for Parental Disrespect (30:17)
5. Amazing Things in Nature (30:18 – 19)
6. The Brazen Woman (30:20)
7. Abuse of Position (30:21 – 23)
8. Wisdom the Key to Success (30:24 – 28)
9. Leadership Qualities (30:29 – 31)
10. A Final Admonition (30:32 – 33)

VIII.The Words of Lemuel (31:1 – 9)

A. Title: The Words Taught to Lemuel by His Mother (31:1)

B. First Warning (31:2 – 3)

C. Second Warning (31:4 – 7)

D. Instruction: Defend the Defenseless (31:8 – 9)

IX.The Wife of Noble Character (31:10 – 31)

A. Praise in General (31:10 – 12)

B. Industrial Pursuits of the Household (31:13 – 15)

C. Financial Enterprise (31:16 – 18)

D. Provision for the Family and the Poor (31:19 – 21)

E. Distinction by Industry (31:22 – 24)

F. Wisdom and Prosperity (31:25 – 27)

G. Merits Recognized (31:28 – 29)

H. Laudatory Summation (31:30 – 31)

1. See D.A. Hubbard, “Wisdom Literature,” in *NBD*, 1334.

2. See Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom: The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979).

3. *ANET*, 412.

4. *ANET*, 413.

5. *ANET*, 415.

6. *ANET*, 423.

7. *ANET*, 422.

8. *ANET*, 420

9. See Robert B.Y. Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), xlv.

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18. Ibid., 302 – 17.

19. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, “Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament,” *TynBul* 5 – 6 (1960): 4 – 6.

20. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East,” 98 – 99.

21. Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 22.

22. For the connection of “the sayings of the wise” (22:17; 24:23) to the “Instruction of Amenemope,” see J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 (1977): 65.

23. Scott, *Proverbs/Ecclesiastes*, xxxv.

24. Kitchen, “Proverbs and Wisdom Books of the Ancient Near East,” 100 – 102.

25. Robert B.Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 59.

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28. There is a good deal of literature that deals with the structure of the book in one part or another. For general discussions, see R. N.Whybray, *The Composition of the Book of Proverbs* (JSOTSup 168; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); D.A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993); Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs 1 – 15*; and Knut Heim, “Structure and Context in Proverbs 10:1 – 22:16” (Ph.D. diss., University of Liverpool, 1996). For specifi c sections, see J. E. Goldingay, *Proverbs* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 75 – 83; Daniel C. Snell, *Twice-Told*

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31. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction*, 68 – 69.

32. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1019.

33. Ibid., 1018.

34. Crawford Howell Toy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1899), xxxi – xxxiv.

Text and Exposition

I. Introduction to the Book of Proverbs (1:1 – 7)

A. Title: The Proverbs of Solomon (1:1)

1 The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel:

COMMENTARY

1 This verse provides the general heading for the entire book, even though the proverbs of Solomon probably do not begin until ch. 10. But the title most naturally uses a genitive of authorship to indicate that most of the collection following was either written by Solomon or collected by him.Interestingly, this book lacks an addressee and in that respect is unlike all the other wisdom literature of the ancient Near East. Those collections were primarily addressed to the crown prince, but here the material is written for the whole nation of Israel.

But what is a proverb? The use of *māšāl*(GK 5442; here *mišlê šᵉlōmōh*, "proverbs of Solomon")suggests the idea of likeness. Toy, 3, referring to the Niphal, suggests the meaning "to become like, be comparable with." For example, Psalm 49:12[13] says that the one who lives only for this life is "like [*nimšal*] the beasts that perish"; and verse 4[5] of the psalm identifies the poem as a wisdom psalm (*ʾemāšāl*, mašm*alm*, "to a proverb"). The word appears also in 1 Samuel 10:12 to report how a proverb *māšāl* "a saying") came into being: "Is Saul also among the prophets?" His prophesying invited comparison to the prophets. This idea for*māšāl* is also supported by the Akkadian (*ʾemāšāl*, "of like portions") and the Arabic *mitlu* ("likeness").

A proverb may then be described as an object lesson based on or using some comparison or analogy. It may be a short saying that communicates a general

truth (Eze 16:44), a lesson drawn from experience (Ps 78:2 – 6), a common example (Dt 28:37), or a pattern of future blessing or cursing (Eze 21:1 – 5). The purpose of a proverb is to help one choose the best course of action among those available — the foolish way is to be avoided and the wise way followed (A. R. Johnson, "*māšāl*" in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955], 162 – 69).

B. Purposes: To Develop Moral Skill and Mental Acumen (1:2 – 6)

OVERVIEW

This book has two purposes: to nurture moral skillfulness and mental discernment.The first purpose is developed in vv.3 – 4; then, after a parenthetical exhortation in v.5, the second purpose is developed in v.6.

2 for attaining wisdom and discipline;
for understanding words of insight;
3 for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life,
doing what is right and just and fair;
4 for giving prudence to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the young —
5 let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance —
6 for understanding proverbs and parables,
the sayings and riddles of the wise.

COMMENTARY

2 The first purpose is that the disciple will develop skillfulness and discipline in holy living (v.2a). "Attaining," from the infinitive *da*ʿ*at* (lit.,"to know"; from GK 3359), encompasses an intellectual and experiential acquisition of wisdom and discipline, for the expression "to know" wisdom not only means to become conscious of it but also to observe it, to realize it, and to experience it.

"Wisdom" (*ḥokmâ*; GK 2683) basically means "skill." This word describes the

“skill” of the craftsmen who worked in the tabernacle (Ex 31:6), the “wits” of seasoned mariners (Ps 107:27), administrative abilities (1Ki 3:28), and the “wise advice”of a counselor (2Sa 20:22). In Proverbs “wisdom”signifies skillful living — the ability to make wise choices and live successfully according to the moral standards of the covenantal community. The one who lives skillfully produces things of lasting value to God and to the community.

The other object to be acquired is “discipline”(*mûsār*;GK 4592; cf. 4:5), the necessary companion of wisdom. *Mûsar* m denotes the training of the moral nature, involving the correcting of waywardness toward folly and the development of reverence for the Lord and personal integrity. Waltke, 1:175,asserts that wisdom cannot be possessed without this instruction to correct moral faults.

The second major purpose of Proverbs is to help the disciple acquire discernment (v.2b). The meaning of the Hiphil infinitive *hābîn*(“to understand, discern”; GK 1067) can be illustrated by the cognate preposition *bên*(“between”). “To discern”means to distinguish *between* things, to compare concepts, form evaluations, or make analogies.One cannot gain wisdom and instruction without understanding.

The object of this infinitive is cognate to it:“words of insight”(*ʾimrê bînâ*, with “words” referring to complete statements, of course). Proverbs will train people to discern lessons about life, such as distinguishing permanent values from immediate gratifications. Both writing and speaking these words were used in the instruction.

3 The first purpose statement is now developed.Once again an infinitive is used — the disciple will receive (*lāqaḥ*, “acquire”) something worth having. In 2:1 this verb (“to accept”) is parallel with *ṣāpan*(“to treasure, store up”). What the student receives is discipline (*mûsār*) and prudence (*haśkēl* GK 8505). The Hiphil infinitive (*haśkēl* indicates the (genitive of) result: discipline produces prudent living, i.e., wise behavior or good sense. To act prudently means “to act circumspectly.” The concept may be illustrated by the actions of Abigail, the wife of the foolish Nabal (1Sa 25).

The three terms that follow — *s.edeq* (GK 7406), *mišpāṭ* (GK 5477), and

*mêšar*m*îm* (GK 4797) — are adverbial accusatives of manner, expressing how the prudent acts manifest themselves. These three tests prevent wisdom and understanding from being misused. *S.edeq* (“righteous” or “righteous ness”)denotes conformity to a standard, as in Deuteronomy 25:15, where weights and measures were required to be right. The religious use of the term signifies what is right according to the standard of God’s law (see Dt 16:18 – 20), viz., conduct that conforms to the moral standards of the covenantal community (see Jer 22:13; Hos 10:12). Knowledge and understanding that does not lead to righ teous-ness is not wisdom at all.

Prudent acts will also exhibit “justice.” *mišpāṭ*(“just,” NIV) essentially signifies a “decision” like that of an arbiter (see Dt 16:18). It is applied to litigation (2Sa 15:2) and the precedent established by such (Ex 21:9; used of a custom in 1Ki 18:18).The term also connotes that which is fitting or proper (Jdg 13:12). Proverbs will develop a life that has a sense of propriety in making decisions.

The third quality is “equity” (“fair,” NIV).*Mêšārîm*, related to *yāšār* (“upright, straight”) can describe that which is pleasing (Jdg 14:3 [“right one”], 7 [“liked”; lit. “she was right”]). The book will instruct a lifestyle that is equitable, one that incorporates the most pleasing aspects (see Ps 9:8[9]).

So the disciple of Proverbs will acquire discipline that will produce a prudent life, and that prudent life will be demonstrated by “doing what is right and just and fair.”

4 The first purpose statement is now developed from the teacher’s point of view — he will give shrewdness to the naive or “simple,” what Waltke, 1:177, calls the morally brainless *petî* (GK 7343). (For a discussion of the simple person, see Kidner, 39.) This naive person (*petî*) is one who is gullible (14:15) and easily enticed (9:4, 16), and falls into traps (22:3). Although this person may be a youth, the characteristics are by no means limited to young people. The term describes anyone on the verge of becoming mature — some never get there. The instructor wants to give such a one a sense of shrewdness (*ʿormâ*;“prudence,” NIV; GK 6893), the ability to foresee evil and prepare for it (13:16; 22:3). With *ʿormâ*;â the naive will be able to avoid the traps in life (see Mt 10:16).

The second half of this verse parallels “simple” or “naive” with “[immature]

youth” (*naʿar*) and “shrewdness” or “prudence” with “knowledge” (*daʿat*; GK 1981) and “discretion” (*mĕzimmâ*, from *zāmam*, “to devise”; GK 4659). This latter expression refers to devising plans or perceiving the best course of action for gaining a goal (Toy, 7). *Da<at* and *mezimmâ* may form a hendiadys to be translated “purposive knowledge,” viz., the perceptive ability to make workable plans. Such ability is crucial for the immature youth in this world.

5 Before elaborating the second purpose statement of the book, the writer digresses to exhort those on the other end of the spectrum. The first verb advises the wise to hear, and the second gives the purpose —“[to] add to [*wĕyôsep*] their learning.” By using the verb “add” the writer is emphasizing that each new hearing of wisdom should increase their wisdom and understanding and not merely confirm them in the wisdom already achieved.

Parallel to this advice is the counsel for the “discerning” (*nābôn*, participle of *bîn*; cf. comment on v.2) to get guidance. This person has the capacity of *bînâ*— one who is discerning. The “guidance” to be obtained is the term *tah.bulôt* (GK 9374; from *ḥābal*, meaning “to bind”; cf. *h.ebel*, “rope, cord”). The term may be illustrated with the cognate *h.ob*m*el* m, the rope pulling done by sailors to steer or guide a ship.Cohen, 2, says *tah.bulôt* is the discernment to steer a right course through life. Proverbs is not simply for the naive and the gullible; everyone can grow by learning from its teachings. Discerning people can obtain guidance from this book so that they might continue in the right way.

6 The second major purpose of the book is to give mental acumen to the student (see comment on v.2). The repetition of *lʿhābîn*from verse 2b shows that this line expands that one and stresses the importance of understanding truth. The point here is that one needs to develop the ability to understand the language of the sages.

The teachings will develop one’s ability in discerning “proverbs” (*māšāl*) and “parables” (*mĕlîṣâ*;â ;GK 4886). This latter term can refer to a satire, a mocking poem, or an alluding saying. The verb *lîṣ*, , related to the Arabic *lâṣa*(“to turn aside”), may have the idea of speaking indirectly. It may have included the idea of a spokesman, for a *melis*. is an interpreter (Ge 42:23). (*mĕlîṣâ*;â may then refer to a saying that has another sense to it that needs uncovering (see H. Neil Richardson, “Some Notes on לוץ and Its Derivatives,” *VT* 5 [1955]: 163 – 79).

The disciple must understand also the “sayings” of the wise. *Dĕbrê* is a general term, but with the genitive *ḥ*ᵉ*kāmîm* (“the wise”) it becomes specific — the words come from the sages. Their teachings at times take the form of “riddles” (*h.îdôt*). This word, if related to the Arabic *hâda* (“to turn aside, avoid”), may refer to what is obscure or indirect, such as the riddles of Samson (Jdg 14:13 – 14) or the queen of Sheba (1Ki 10:1).

C. Motto: The Fear of the Lord (1:7)

7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,
but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

COMMENTARY

7 Here we have the theological foundation of the book — the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (cf. Ps 111:10). This statement is different from the purpose statements given so far. It tells us what is basic to the understanding of the book: Reverential “fear” (*yir ,â*, GK 3711) of the Lord is the prerequisite of knowledge. This term can describe dread (Dt 1:29), being terrified (Jnh 1:10), standing in awe (1Ki 3:28), or having reverence (Lev 19:3). With the Lord as the object, *ʾyirʾâ* captures both aspects of shrinking back in fear and drawing close in awe. (The expression “the fear of the LORD” occurs fourteen times in the book.)

Such fear is not a trembling dread that paralyzes action, but neither is it a polite reverence (Plaut, 32).“The fear of the LORD” ultimately expresses reverential submission to the Lord’s will and thus characterizes a true worshiper. In this context it is the first and controlling principle of knowledge (“beginning” can refer to the first thing, the chief thing, or the principal thing). Elsewhere in Proverbs the fear of the Lord is the foundation for wisdom (9:10) or the discipline leading to wisdom (15:33); it is expressed in hatred of evil (8:13), and it results in a prolonged life (10:27).

By contrast, fools disdain wisdom and discipline.They are not able to grasp this prerequisite, for in their pride they have chosen to reject the teachings of

wisdom. Verse 7b is the antithesis of verse 7a.The term ,ʾĕwîlîm(“fools”; GK 211) describes those who are thick-brained, conceited, and stubborn (Greenstone, 6). They lack understanding (10:21), do not store up knowledge (10:14), fail to attain wisdom (24:7), talk loosely (14:3), are filled with pride (26:5), and are contentious (20:3). They are morally unskilled and refuse any correction (15:15; 27:22).

Fools are people who “despise” wisdom and discipline; they treat these virtues as worthless and contemptible. This attitude is illustrated in Genesis 25:34, where Esau despised the birthright, and in Nehemiah 4:4, where Sanballat and Tobiah belittled the Jews.

II. A Father’s Admonition to Acquire Wisdom (1:8 – 9:18)

A. Introductory Exhortation (1:8 – 9)

8 Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.
9 They will be a garland to grace your head
and a chain to adorn your neck.

COMMENTARY

8 The disciple is exhorted to heed parental guidance. Youths are in the greatest need of admonition — the passions are strong, self-confidence is growing, and group acceptance is important — but the experience of real life has not yet tempered them. “My son,” the customary form of address for a disciple, derives from the idea that parents are responsible for moral instruction (4:3 – 4;cf. Dt 6:7). Here the disciple is to respond (*šema* <“Listen” [NIV], with the attitude of “taking heed to”) to “discipline” (*mûsār;*“instruction,” NIV), which is normally the father’s responsibility (except in Pr 31:1, where it is the warning of the mother).

The son is also to follow his "mother's teaching."*Tôrâ* ("teaching") may be cognate to a verb meaning "to point, direct" (cf. BDB, 434 – 35), so that the idea of teaching can be illustrated as pointing in the right direction (see Ge 46:28). At any rate, in Proverbs this instruction is for ordering the life (see also 6:20; 31:26).

9 As a result of heeding instruction in the law, the disciple receives a special promise. "Grace," the charm that teaching brings to the disciple, refers to those qualities that make him agreeable. The metaphor compares these qualities to an attractive wreath worn around the head.

Obedience will also improve the disciple, as the metaphor of the neck pendant speaks of adorning the life. The one who loses the rough edges through disciplined training will present a pleasing presence to the world (McKane, 268).

B. Admonition to Avoid Easy but Unjust Riches (1:10 – 19)

10 My son, if sinners entice you,
do not give in to them.
11 If they say, "Come along with us;
let's lie in wait for someone's blood,
let's waylay some harmless soul;
12 let's swallow them alive, like the grave,
and whole, like those who go down to the pit;
13 we will get all sorts of valuable things
and fill our houses with plunder;
14 throw in your lot with us,
and we will share a common purse" —
15 my son, do not go along with them,
do not set foot on their paths;
16 for their feet rush into sin,
they are swift to shed blood.
17 How useless to spread a net
in full view of all the birds!
18 These men lie in wait for their own blood;
they waylay only themselves!
19 Such is the end of all who go after ill-gotten gain;
it takes away the lives of those who get it.

COMMENTARY

10 The summary statement warns the son not to consent to the enticement of moral misfits. The term for “entice,” related to the root of “simple” or “naive” (*petî*, from pātâ; GK 7331) mentioned in verse 4, means “to allure, persuade, entice, seduce.”Here the enticement is to do evil since it comes from “sinners” (ḥaṭṭā’îm in this context describes professional criminals, a gang of robbers).

11 The young man is being enticed with the offer of joining professional criminals in a life of crime. The words of the temptation are provided by the wise teacher — the unruly gang would never use expressions that condemn their acts; rather, they would try to cover them up or give them a different spin. The text explains how they waylay the unwary (vv.11 – 12). The ambush the young man is asked to join is vicious; the verb ,’ārab (“to lie in wait”) occurs elsewhere of hostile purposes such as murder (Dt 19:11), kidnapping (Jdg 21:20), and seduction (Pr 23:28). Here the aim is bloodshed.

The attack is also evil.The wicked lie in wait for the innocent (nāqî;' “harmless soul,” NIV), and their attack is without a cause (ḥinnām [untranslated in NIV] is often used this way; see 1Sa 25:31; Ps 35:7).

12 – 14 The criminals assure the novice of swift success; they will swallow up victims who are in the vitality of life (tāmîm, “full of health, whole,”GK 9459) as surely and swiftly as death opens and swallows its victims (v.12; cf. Nu 16:32 *– 33);they determine to remove them from the living.They are confident that by sharing the wealth (v.13), they will fill their houses with “plunder”(šālāl). The use of (šālāl). elsewhere for spoils from war suggests that theirs is a life of crime (Cohen, 4). So the offer made to the youth is to pursue with the roustabouts a life of easy but ill-gotten gain (v.4).

15 – 16 The young man’s parents strongly advise him to avoid such evil companies because their lifestyle, though it may appear prosperous, leads to destruction. The advice “do not go” (v.15) counters the allurement of the wicked — “come along with us” (v.11). The primary reason for not going is that the sinners’ purpose is bloodthirsty (v.16);therefore, their retribution is sure (cf. v.18). In the final analysis, the trap the wicked lay for others will catch them.

17 – 19 There are two ways to interpret v.17 within the context. One way is to see a comparison with the folly of birds that fall into a snare even though forewarned; likewise the wicked, because they are driven by lust, fall into the snare God lays. The other is to see a contrast between the natural behavior of birds when forewarned and the irrational greed of robbers. In other words, it is futile to spread out a net for birds that are watching, but these men are so blinded by evil that they fail to recognize the trap (v.18).

The blind folly of greed leads to their doom —retribution is the law that will take away their lives (v.19; see also Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 173 – 74). But they do not even see it coming, for they do not connect the consequences with their acts. At least birds have the good sense of seeing the danger, and so the fowler has to sneak up on them to trap them.

NOTES

10 For the conditional clause in the MT (“if sinners entice you”), the LXX has rendered a volitive: “Let not impious men lead you astray.”

12 The LXX has an editorial variation for v.12b patterned after Pss 34:16[17] and 109:15: “Let us take away the remembrance of him from the earth.”

16 The verse is not in the LXX. It may have been dropped by dittography. Some argue that the verse interrupts the flow of the argument by describing the sinners instead of giving a reason to heed the warning. But the verse probably does both.

C. Warning against Disregarding or Despising Wisdom (1:20 – 33)

20 Wisdom calls aloud in the street,
she raises her voice in the public squares;
21 at the head of the noisy streets she cries out,
in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:
22 “How long will you simple ones love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery
and fools hate knowledge?
23 If you had responded to my rebuke,
I would have poured out my heart to you
and made my thoughts known to you.
24 But since you rejected me when I called
and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand,
25 since you ignored all my advice
and would not accept my rebuke,
26 I in turn will laugh at your disaster;
I will mock when calamity overtakes you —
27 when calamity overtakes you like a storm,
when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind,
when distress and trouble overwhelm you.
28 “Then they will call to me but I will not answer;
they will look for me but will not find me.
29 Since they hated knowledge

and did not choose to fear the LORD,
30 since they would not accept my advice
and spurned my rebuke,
31 they will eat the fruit of their ways
and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.
32 For the waywardness of the simple will kill them,
and the complacency of fools will destroy them;
33 but whoever listens to me will live in safety
and be at ease, without fear of harm."

COMMENTARY

20 – 21 The first two verses introduce a lengthy appeal from wisdom (Phyllis Trible, "Wisdom Builds a Poem:The Architecture of Proverbs 1:20 – 33," *JBL* 94 [1975]: 509 – 18). In public places stands personified Wisdom, exhorting the ignorant and the scornful to listen and warning of destruction if they refuse (Toy, 20). The book includes three such personifications — in 1:20 – 33; 8:1 – 36; and 9:1 – 6. Here "wisdom" is in the plural (*ḥokmôt*; v.20) to signify the intensity and comprehensiveness of it all — the "all-embracing, eloquent, veracious, and elevated wisdom" (McKane, 272). In addition, the verb for "crying out" (*rānan*, "to give a ringing cry"; "calls aloud," NIV) expresses an excited exhortation.

The location of this exhortation is in the public places —"in the street . . . the public squares . . . the gateways" — suggesting that wisdom is readily available for the business of living; it is for the common person, not the scholar exclusively. These places were the centers for all activities: daily affairs (2Ki 7:1), justice (Ru 4:1), employment (Mt 20:3), and even playing (Zec 8:5 et al.). Since wisdom touches all aspects of life, the setting is appropriate. Here Wisdom, like a prophet, calls out (McKane, 273).

22 Wisdom offers a complaint —"How long.. . ?" — that addresses three types of people: the "simple" (*pᵉtāyim*), the scoffers or "mockers" (*lēṣîm*), and the dullards or "fools" (*kᵉsîlîm*). The first is the naive person or the simpleton, the second the defiant and cynical freethinker, and the third the morally insensitive fool (Kidner, 40). Each is satisfied with his ways and does not listen to reason (see J. A.Emerton, "A Note on the Hebrew Text of Proverbs 1:22 – 23," *JTS* 19 [1966]: 609 – 14).

23 The invitation takes the form of a conditional clause — “If only you’d respond” (NEB). Wisdom is firmly resolved to pour out her words (lit., “my breath,” a metonymy for words spoken, and not in the sense of “my spirit”) on those who respond.Like a copious spring she will gush forth to them.

24 – 28 There is grave danger, however, in disregarding the invitation. If the call has been extended for some time — “How long?” (v.22; see also Isa 65:2) — then the warning is given for a prolonged refusal. Because Wisdom has been continually rejected, she will laugh at the calamity of those who have rejected it. Wisdom will not laugh at the disaster, but at the confirmation of what is right over what is wrong at the time of disaster (Waltke, 1:207). This retributive justice is expressed figuratively in vv.25 – 28 as Wisdom’s mocking at their distress.

But then v.28 explains the meaning of the mock-ing: Wisdom will not be there to help when the fools cry out from their distress.The figure of laughing reveals the absurdity of choosing a foolish way of life and being totally unprepared for disaster.

29 – 33 This section closes with a denunciation for despising Wisdom. Not only had these foolish ones preferred their folly, but they had also despised the knowledge of ethical and religious principles for life (v.29; cf. Cohen, 7). Moreover, they continually spurned Wisdom’s reproofs (v.30).

The punishment for such indifference and antagonism takes the form of retribution (vv.31 – 33).The term “fruit” (v.31) is used metaphorically for the consequence of actions, likened to growth that culminates in produce (McKane, 275 – 76). Their way — their life and what it produces — stands in contrast to the way of Wisdom they have spurned.

The teaching of retribution is confirmed in v.32. The “turning away” (“waywardness,” NIV) and the “complacency” will be the ruin of these people. But those who heed the teachings of Wisdom will live in safety and security (v.33). The expressions used suggest a permanent, settled condition free from the sense of danger or dread. Such is the contrast between the false security of the wicked and the true and lasting peace of the righteous.

NOTES

21 Instead of “at the head of the noisy streets she cries out” (MT), the LXX reads, “She proclaims on the summits of the walls.” It then expands the verse to read, “sits at the gates of the princes, at the gates of the city she boldly says.” The word t„הֹמִיּוֹת (*hōmîyyôt*,“noisy”) is the feminine plural active participle from הָמָה (*hāmâ*,' “to murmur, roar”). רֹאשׁ הֹמִיּוֹת (*rōʾš hōmîyyôt*) then describes the head of bustling streets or, as Perowne, 45, says, “the place where the street branches off or has its beginning.” The LXX reads “wall” as though from the word חֹמָה (*ḥōmâ*). Waltke, 1:197, notes that the parallel in 8:2 better matches “wall” than does “noisy.”

21 – 23 The LXX turns the questions into declarative sentences: “So long as the guileless hold fast to righteousness, they shall not be shamed; but the foolish, being lovers of insolences, have become impious, have hated knowledge.”

D. The Benefits of Seeking Wisdom (2:1 – 22)

OVERVIEW

This chapter appears to be a long poem in six parts: the appeal for wisdom followed by a fivefold blessing. Because there is no instruction about specific matters, McKane, 281, argues that the formal structure is more complicated and follows the instruction pattern of “The Instructions of Amenemope”; the language of the chapter is set in the frame of religious commitment and its derivative, morality.

Waltke, 1:216 – 17, provides a survey of the structure of the chapter, an alphabetic poem of twenty-two verses designed to present completeness; he divides it into two halves (vv.1 – 11 and 12 – 22), with each half having two stanzas of four verses each and a concluding three-verse section.(He draws on M. Fox, “The Pedagogy of Proverbs 2,” *JBL* 113 [1994]: 233 – 43; for analysis

of the parallelism he refers to D. Pardee, *Ugaritic and Hebrew Poetic Parallelism: A Trial Cut [⊂nt I and Proverbs 2]* [VTSup 39; Leiden: Brill, 1988].)

1. The Admonition to Receive Wisdom (2:1 – 4)

1 My son, if you accept my words
and store up my commands within you,
2 turning your ear to wisdom
and applying your heart to understanding,
3 and if you call out for insight
and cry aloud for understanding,
4 and if you look for it as for silver
and search for it as for hidden treasure,

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 The teacher again makes the appeal: To attain wisdom requires constant meditation and rigid discipline. Charles T. Fritsch (*IB*, 4:793) refers to it as a receptive spirit and an ardent search.

The requirement of meditation begins with receiving the teaching. “Accept” is paralleled with “store up” (v.1), and “words” is paralleled with “commands,” thus showing intensification from the first colon to the second. The figure “store up” implies that most teaching cannot be used immediately but that some time will pass before education’s effects are felt (Plaut, 43). In the meantime the teachings will develop in their pupils attitudes that will influence their actions at some time in the future.

Such a perspective calls for patience by the students — patience that makes both heart and mind attentive.The ear is the instrument of hearing obediently, and the heart the focus of the mental process of learning and understanding. The figures (metonymies) describe a responsive and obedient person, with “ear” and “heart” (v.2) representing the mental faculties.

The other requirement is the use of the voice in a diligent search for wisdom

(v.3). On his own initiative the disciple is to summon or “call out . . .for” (*qārā’ + l’*) understanding.The elevation in the lines from “call out” to “cry aloud” suggests that if understanding does not come immediately, one should raise the voice to a higher pitch and put forth greater efforts (Greenstone, 17). Thus, the ear hears the teaching, the mind understands what is said, and the voice is used to inquire after true knowledge.

This search for wisdom and understanding should be as diligent as the search for precious metal (“silver”; v.4), the simile suggesting both the value of the treasure and the diligence of the demanding search. Looking for such a treasure as silver is illustrated beautifully by the account in Job 28:9 – 11, and the intensity of the word “search” may be illustrated by the searching of the brothers’ sacks in Genesis 44:12. The starting point in the search for understanding is revelation — specific words and commandments — and the method is not one of free speculation but of exploring and treasuring the teachings (Kidner, 61).

2. Consequences of Receiving Wisdom (2:5 – 22)

a. Knowledge of God and His Protection (2:5 – 8)

5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.
6 For the LORD gives wisdom,
and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.
7 He holds victory in store for the upright,
he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless,
8 for he guards the course of the just
and protects the way of his faithful ones.

COMMENTARY

5 The point of this first consequence is direct:When you seek wisdom, you find God. The search will enable one to understand the fear of the Lord. So the fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom (1:7), it is also the goal. The wise will gain deeper insight into it.

The “knowledge of God” is knowledge about God. Referring to more than intellectual opinion, it also includes obedience (“in all your ways acknowledge him,” 3:6), for to know God is to react ethically and spiritually to his will. The expression is found in Hosea 4:1 and 6:6 parallel to *h.esed*, “faithful covenant love” (GK 2876), meaning devotion or loyalty to God. Coupled with the fear of the Lord, this knowledge means that the disciple will follow God’s moral code; to know God is to react ethically to his will, to follow his principles (Greenstone, 18).

6 – 8 The reason the one who seeks knowledge will find God is that God is the source of wisdom and knowledge (v.6) — it comes from “his mouth.”Moreover, God has stored up wisdom as a protection for his saints (vv.7 – 8). The word translated “victory”(תּוּשִׁיָּה) means “sound efficient wisdom” (GK 9370), or the power or capacity or competence of wisdom (McKane, 80). The LXX translated it “salvation.”The term includes the ideas of both sound wisdom and its effect, namely, abiding success — achievement and deliverance. God holds in store sound wisdom that is powerful for his saints.

Moreover, God protects the whole enterprise since he is a “shield” (a metaphor for protection) for those who walk blamelessly before him. Verse 8 expands this idea of protection with the verbs “to guard” and “to protect” (lit., “keep”). But what God guards is the life of the upright, those who walk blamelessly, the just, and his pious ones. Divine provision and protection are prepared for the righteous.

b. Moral Discernment (2:9 – 22)

i. Discernment for Living (2:9 – 11)

9 Then you will understand what is right and just
and fair — every good path.
10 For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.
11 Discretion will protect you,
and understanding will guard you.

COMMENTARY

9 The thought of this second consequence is introduced with *tāḇîn*— "you will understand"(also used in 1:2; 2:5).The disciple will develop the intellectual capacity and moral insight to discern what is "right" (*ṣedeq*), "just" (*mišpāṭ*), and "fair" (*mêšārîm*)— — viz., every good path (cf. 1:3). *Maʿgāl* ("path") is used metaphorically for the course of a person's actions. The word is related to the verb *gālal*("to roll") and the noun *ʿagālâ*("cart");so *maʿgāl* literally means "the track of a wagon wheel" and, therefore, is parallel to the idiomatic "way." Thus "every good path" is a lifestyle that regularly leads in the direction of what is morally good (Toy, 30).

10 – 11 Verses 10 and 11 explain the basis for this understanding. Wisdom will take up its abode in the heart (inner life), and knowledge will be pleased to dwell in the soul. These words speak of the inner life, the mind, the emotions, the will, and the conscience. *Nāʿām*("pleasant"; v.10) describes a quality that attracts one to an object (as in SS 7:7) — so knowledge is attractive and attracting.When a person assimilates wisdom, doing right becomes attractive and delightful, for that person sees the advantage of it (Toy, 41).

In addition, this assimilated wisdom will manifest itself in discretion (knowledge and understanding with a purpose) and discernment that protect from evil, or it will save a good man from the consequences of naivete (McKane, 283).

ii. Protection from Evil Men (2:12 – 15)

12 Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men,
from men whose words are perverse,
13 who leave the straight paths
to walk in dark ways,
14 who delight in doing wrong
and rejoice in the perverseness of evil,
15 whose paths are crooked
and who are devious in their ways.

COMMENTARY

12 – 15 These verses present the first of two specific examples of protection from evil — from the "way of the wicked men" (v.12). The adjective "wicked" (*rāʿ*) describes what is unpleasant, bringing pain and misery. Evil ways bring harm to others. The parallel colon clarifies how they harm others — they speak perverse things, things contrary to what is right and proper (Cohen, 10).The word "perverse" is related to the verb *hāpak*, "to overthrow, overturn" (as in the destruction of a city); perverse things are things that turn sensible and right things upside down. Perverse speech is the inevitable expression of the evil within.

Verses 13 – 15 describe the purpose, pleasure, and perverted paths of those who are wicked. Their purpose is to walk in the ways of darkness (v.13); they abandon the straight way to follow an evil way that can only be described as "dark." Darkness is often metaphorical for sinfulness, ignorance, or oppression. Their way is uncertain, devoid of ethical illumination (see 4:18; Ecc 2:13).

Their "delight" (v.14), in fact, their joy, is in doing what is morally evil. This activity may not be due to an abnormal or sadistic delight but rather to dullness of conscience (Greenstone, 21). Verse 15, using a variation of the expressions of the preceding verses, describes their perverted ways — evil men, constantly turning aside to the wrong ways, are twisted (as in deformed bodies) and devious (meaning crafty and cunning) in the path they follow. The disciple needs wisdom for protection from those who turn the Lord's ways upside down and try to draw others in by creating ethical chaos.

iii. Protection from the Evil Woman (2:16 – 19)

16 It will save you also from the adulteress,
from the wayward wife with her seductive words,
17 who has left the partner of her youth
and ignored the covenant she made before God.
18 For her house leads down to death
and her paths to the spirits of the dead.
19 None who go to her return
or attain the paths of life.

COMMENTARY

16 – 19 The second class of evil persons from whom wisdom delivers is the licentious woman.Her seductive voice joins the appeal from the disloyal men but with a different result; whereas the evil man brings pain and perversion, the evil woman brings moral ruin through a more subtle temptation. Prostitutes and adulteresses existed in Israel from the earliest times (Jdg 11:1; 1Ki 3:16;Hos 3:1; notice also laws against adultery in Ex 20:14; Lev 20:10). In this passage the licentious woman is first described (vv.16 – 17); then her ruin and that of those who submit to her are presented as a warning (vv.18 – 19).

The descriptive term “strange” (*zārâ*; “adulteress,” NIV) describes this woman as outside the framework of the covenantal community (see Sni-jders, 85 – 86). The term does not necessarily mean that she is a foreigner; rather, she is estranged from the corporate life of the community, with its social and religious conventions (McKane, 285).

An Israelite woman is probably in view, for her marriage is called a “covenant” (v.17), and she offers communion sacrifices (cf. 7:5, 14). Such a woman is acting outside the legal bounds of marriage within the covenant. The parallel term “wayward wife”(lit., “foreign woman”) would have the same sense;she may be an Israelite, but she is wayward, loose, a nonconformist to standard morality.

The subtlety of the appeal comes from flattering speech — the adulteress talks smoothly (see 5:3; an example of such talk occurs in 7:14 – 20).Acquiring discernment will protect the disciple from the smooth, seductive speech of a temptress.Seductive talk is evil not only because it reveals a brazen character, but also because the adulteress is guilty of marital infidelity; she leaves the “companion of her youth” (used here and in Jer 3:4 for the husband; the word means one who is well known, a familiar partner) and is unmindful of the covenant.

“Covenant” probably refers to the temptress’s marriage vows (Mal 2:14) but could mean the covenantal law that prohibited adultery (Ex 20:14).If the marriage vows are meant, such a covenant was entered into at betrothal, when the dowry was established. The adulteress violates her pledge of fidelity.

The effective warning against this type of evil derives from understanding the

result of such infidelity — it leads to destruction, the very opposite of the happy and prosperous life. The syntax of v.18 is difficult. “Her house” could be taken in the construction as “she *with her house* sinks down to death,” but “she sinks down to death, *which is her house*,” may have better support; for 9:18 states that the dead are in her house and that her guests are in the netherworld (see Notes).

Not only does she sink down to death, but also her paths lead to the “shades” (“the spirits of the dead,” NIV). The “shades” are the inhabitants of Sheol; the term describes the shadowy continuation of those who have lost their vitality and strength (see R. F. Schnell, *IDB*, 4:35, s.v. “Rephaim”). So the inevitable fate of her course of life is to be among the departed in the realm of the dead. The expression may carry a figurative meaning rather than a literal one: Get entangled with her, and you may find only estrangement from the living community, a life among outcast moral lepers who have taken a journey into the land of no return (McKane, 288).

NOTES

17 The MT reads “covenant of her God,בְּרִית אֱלֹהֶיהָ (*bᵉrît ʾᵉlōheyhā*) . The LXX simply has “covenant of God,” διαθήκην θείαν (*diathēkēn**theian***). The editors, recognizing the reference is to marriage, suggest “covenant of her tent,” אָהֳלָהּ (*ʾohᵒlāh,* “her tent, hut”) = חֻפָּתָהּ (*ḥuppātāh,* “her covering, tent”).

18 The difficulty in this passage concerns the relationship of בֵּיתָהּ (*bêtāh,* “her house”) to the rest of the sentence. The MT literally reads, “she sinks down to death her house.” The verb שָׁחָה (*šāḥâ*) is the third feminine singular perfect tense of שׇׁחַח (*šûaḥ,* “to sink, bow down”).בַּיִת (*bayit*, “house”) is not normally a feminine noun; so it is probably not the subject of the verb.The editors suggest an emendation of נְתִיבָתָהּ (*nᵉtîbātāh,* “her path”) in comparison with 7:27. But all the versions support the consonantal text of the MT.

The LXX seems to have read a verb שָׁתָה (*šātâ,* third feminine singular perfect of שִׁית [*šît,* “to set, place”]) and made *bêtah*m the object: “she has established her house near death.” But we are left with the explanation of the more difficult verbal form in the MT. Toy, 48, suggests taking the verb from שָׁתָה (*šātâ,* “to sink”), but that verb normally means “bow down.” Delitzsch, 1:83, suggests that *bêtah*m is a permutative noun that qualifies the subject — “she together with all that belongs to her.” The solution of Kidner, 62, is to take *bêtah*m in apposition to מָוֶת (*māwet*), meaning that “death” is her house. Some versions (NEB, NRSV) have emended the word *byt*, “her house,” to *ntybt*, “her path,” in comparison with 5:9; 7:8; and 9:14.

iv. Enablement for Righ teous Living (2:20 – 22)

20 Thus you will walk in the ways of good men
and keep to the paths of the
21 For the upright will live in the land,
and the blameless will remain in it;
22 but the wicked will be cut off from the land,
and the unfaithful will be torn from it.

COMMENTARY

20 – 22 The passage ends on the more positive note that wisdom will enable people to do what is right and to enjoy God's blessing. Once again the promise of blessing is for good people, the righteous, the upright, and the blameless — the same terms used earlier for those who follow the path of wisdom. Here the text brings in the Deutero-nomic emphasis on the land, God's supreme gift being the fulfillment of the promises. The reference to the land could refer to the land of Israel or the whole earth — perhaps even the world to come.The upright will enjoy security and prosperity in it, but the wicked will be rooted out in divine judgment.

Those judged are called the "wicked" ("ungodly"in older translations), a term that refers to those who remain guilty before God, evil in their thoughts, words, and deeds, and therefore not members of the covenantal community of the righ teous. They are also called "the unfaithful," a word that has more of an emphasis on treachery in a relationship than simple unfaithfulness. The wicked will be "cut off." The expression, frequent in Leviticus (e.g., Lev 17:10; 19:19), refers to judgment on the person — excommunication at least, but probably death as well. They will not inherit life in the earth;they will be rooted out of future blessing. This excision also will preserve the faithful community in their righ teousness before their holy God.

NOTE

20 The LXX reads v.20 as a conditional sentence and connects it with v.19: "for if they had gone in good paths, they would have found the paths of righteousness easy."Toy, 38 – 40, thinks that v.20 interrupts the flow of v.19 and v.20, so he joins vv.9 and 20 and then follows with vv.10 – 19.

E. Admonition to Follow the Way of Wisdom in Relationships with God and People (3:1 – 35)

OVERVIEW

The instruction in this chapter advances the themes of the last one and may be divided into two speeches: vv.1 – 12 and vv.13 – 35. The first speech may be charted as follows (see Waltke, 1:239, for more detail): an introduction that calls for the disciple to keep the commands (v.1) and hold fast to love (v.3), with the corresponding motivations of life and peace (v.2) and favor (v.4). The body of the speech calls for trust, favor, and honor (vv.5, 7, 9) with the corresponding motivations of following the straight path, healing, and prosperity (vv.6, 8, and 10). The conclusion admonishes the disciple not to reject discipline, which is the proof of the father's love (vv.11 – 12).

1. Introductory Exhortation (3:1 – 4)

1 My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
2 for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you prosperity.
3 Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
4 Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 The first exhortation is to follow the father's "teaching" (*tôrâ*; GK 9368) because it will bring a long and peaceful life. Kidner, 63, observes that where *tôrâ* occurs in the book unqualified, it refers to divine law; but when qualified, as here, it refers to home teachings. Here the verbs "do not forget" and "keep" remind the disciple of general educational discipline.The result is a life worth living, free from danger and trouble (so *ḥayyîm* and *šālôm*; "life" and "prosperity," NIV).

3 The second exhortation is to be faithful and trustworthy because doing so brings honor with God and people (v.4). "Love" (*h.esed*; GK 2876) and "faithfulness" (*ʾemet*; GK 622) are the two basic covenantal terms in Israel. *H*

¢*esed* is essentially fidelity to obligations arising from a relationship (see Nelson Glueck, *H¢esed in the Bible* [trans. Alfred Gottschalk; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967], 55); ,(*ʾemet;* is essentially that which can be relied on, that which is stable (Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Book of Proverbs* [Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1852], 167). The two words together form a hendiadys: "faithful love."

These words, coupled with the allusion to Deuteronomy 6:8 and even Jeremiah 31:3, show that the content of this disciplined life is the Yahwistic faith.By "binding" and "writing," the teacher is stressing that the teachings become a part of the disciple's nature (Toy, 58). The ramifications of this terminology are that the disciple is actually subject to the Lord, not the teacher, and that the requisite "discipline" (*mûsār*; m; v.11) is respect and obedience for the Lord and his teaching and not merely for a human instructor. (See McKane, 290 – 91, though he argues that Deuteronomy was influenced by Proverbs.)

4 This verse provides the final motivation: favor and a good name. Parallel to 13:15, this difficult line probably signifies that the disciple will have a reputation for good understanding, meaning that he will be respected by God and people.

NOTE

4 The MT reads literally, "You will find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and men."The word "understanding," שֵׂכֶל (*śēkel*) seems not to form a good parallel with "favor." The LXX attaches the first two words of v.4, וּמְצָא־חֵן (*ûmṣāʾ-ḥēn*, "Then you will win favor"), to v.3 and then reads v.4 as "and devise excellent things in the sight of the Lord and of men" (cf. Ro 12:17; 2Co 8:21). The Targum and the Peshitta list the words separately — "favor and good and understanding."Toy, 58, suggests changing the word שֵׂכֶל (*śēkel*) to ìve שֵׁם (*šēm* "name"), an emendation followed by the NIV. There is no manuscript evidence for such a change, however. It is possible that *śēkel* has a derived meaning from "understanding"that would be akin to "success," i.e., a reputation for good understanding.

2. Admonition to Be Faithful to the Lord (3:5 – 12)

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
6 in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.
7 Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
8 This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.
9 Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
10 then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.
11 My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline
and do not resent his rebuke,
12 because the LORD disciplines those he loves,
as a father the son he delights in.

COMMENTARY

5 – 6 Several specific instructions comprise this general admonition to be faithful. The first is to trust in the Lord and not in oneself, because he grants success. In other words, the teaching is valid because God will bless it. *Bāṭaḥ* ("trust"; GK 1053) carries the force of relying on someone for security;the confidence is to be in the Lord and not in human understanding. Here the object of faith is what the Lord has said through the wise teaching of the father.The call is for a trust characterized by total commitment — "with *all* your heart," "in *all* your ways." *Bînâ*("understanding") is now cast in a sinful mode (cf. 1:2, 6), so there is to be a difference between the *bînâ*that wisdom brings and the natural *bînâ* that undermines faith.

The traditional rendering "acknowledge him"(v.6) needs to be refined, for the expression suggests "confess him." But the verb is "know him," and it reflects the intimate experience of a personal relationship. The sequence of the lines may also suggest their communication of a promise: by trusting him fully you will know him. What these beautiful expressions call for is "absolute obedience and surrender in every realm of life" (Fritsch, *IB* , 4:799).When obedient faith is present, the Lord will guide the believer along life's paths in spite of difficulties and hindrances. The idea of "straight" contrasts to the crooked and perverse

ways of the wicked.

7 – 8 The second instruction is to revere the Lord and avoid evil. Here, too, there is a difference between human wisdom and the new wisdom from above (cf. Isa 5:21). There must be a higher source, and v.7b clarifies it: “Fear the LORD and shun evil.”Compliance with this instruction is therapeutic; it will be health to the body and nourishment for the frame (v.8). The healing that the fear of the Lord and avoidance of evil brings is first and foremost spiritual. Scripture often uses the physical body to describe inner spiritual or psychical feelings (see A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* [Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1949], 67 – 68).

9 – 10 The third piece of advice is to give back to God some of one’s wealth as a sacrifice in recognition that God gave it. Here we find a cultic verse in the admonition (see Ex 23:19; Nu 28:26 – 27; Dt 18:4; 26:1 – 2). The admonition reminds the faithful of their religious duties to God. Kidner, 64, poignantly puts it, “To ‘know’ God in our financial ‘ways’ is to see that these honour Him.” Then follows the promise of blessing in the “barns” and the “vats.”

11 – 12 The final instruction warns the disciple not to rebel against the Lord’s discipline, for it is an evidence of his love. God takes great pains with his people because he cares so much for them, and that care can be painful at times. Wisdom literature knows that the righteous do not enjoy uninterrupted blessing; suffering remains a problem to the sages, and this text records one of their solutions (see Scott, 47).

The friends of Job, and countless others after them, reduce suffering to just punishment; but this passage reminds us that there is far more to it. This motivation recalls the language of the Davidic covenant (2Sa 7:14; Ps 89:32 – 33), which mentions discipline in love. Indeed it is the father-son relationship that provides insight into the nature of that discipline (see comment on v.22). These verses are quoted in Hebrews 12:5 – 6 to show that suffering is a sign of sonship.

NOTES

8 The MT has לְשָׁרֶךָ (*lᵉšārrekā*) "to your navel," not the NIV's "to your body." The difficulty is that שֹׁר (*šār*, "navel") is never used for "body" in the OT. The *BHS* editors suggest a slight change either to לִבְשָׂרֶךָ (*libśārekâ* "to your flesh") or לִשְׁאֵרֶךָ (*lišᵓērekā*, "to your body"). Such changes run contrary to the canons of textual criticism by preferring a common reading to the rare and difficult one. Since *šar*m only occurs twice in the Bible, it would be hard to conclude how it was or was not used. And since the words here must be synechdoches anyway (i.e., the part representing the whole, here the navel representing the firm center of the body, paralleled by the bony framework), *šar*m works as well as בָּשָׂר (*bāśār*, "flesh").

11 The LXX has "faint not" (see Heb 12:5). This expression appears to be either an interpretation (for "despise not"//"resent not") or a translation of another reading.

12 וְכָאָב (*ûkᵉᵓāb*, "as a father") is slightly difficult in that it is the only place in Proverbs that identifies God as Father. Here the LXX reads a hiphil verb, וְיַכְאִב (*wᵉyakᵓib*, "and scourges"), thus yielding, "Whom the Lord loves, he reproves, and scourges every son whom he receives."The reading "scourges" (= afflicts) fits the parallelism; however, there is not sufficient difficulty with אָב (*ᵓab*, "father") to reject it in favor of a reading with better parallelism.

3. Commendation of the Way of Wisdom (3:13 – 26)

OVERVIEW

The second half of the chapter may be made up of independent poems, the first three providing the motivation (vv.13 – 18, 19 – 20, 21 – 26), and the fourth the climactic lesson (vv.27 – 35).

a.Wisdom the Most Valuable Possession (3:13 – 18)

13 Blessed is the man who finds wisdom,
the man who gains understanding,
14 for she is more profitable than silver
and yields better returns than gold.
15 She is more precious than rubies;
nothing you desire can compare with her.
16 Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honor.
17 Her ways are pleasant ways,
and all her paths are peace.
18 She is a tree of life to those who embrace her;
those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

COMMENTARY

13 Verses 13 – 18 appear to be following a hym-nic style, for "blessed" (*ʾašrê*) replaces the imperative (McKane, 289). The statement "Blessed is the man"is followed by a series of motive clauses giving the reason for this happy estate. "Blessed" describes heavenly bliss stemming from being right with God; it depicts the human condition of well-being that comes with God's blessing or as a divine reward for righ teousness (see S. H. Blank, s.v.,"Happiness," *IDB*, 2523).

14 – 18 The statement concerning the blessedness of finding wisdom is now validated. Wisdom (personified) is better than wealth and riches (vv.14 – 15), for her yield is power, influence, and respect — the gifts of life (McKane, 295). She is also compared to "a tree of life" (v.18), the symbol of vitality and fullness of life (v.16).

This figure, drawing on Genesis 2 – 3 (cf. Ge 3:22), signifies at least that wisdom is the source of a long and beneficial life (v.16; see Ralph Marcus, "The Tree of Life in Proverbs," *JBL* 62 [1943]:117 – 20). Consequently, those who obtain wisdom will be "blessed" (v.18, forming an inclusion with v.13). Waltke, 1:260, argues that in the light of the use of this motif in literature, its significance here includes healing and immortality; he further explains that Proverbs then functions symbolically (and provisionally) as the tree of life that was lost in Genesis 2:22 – 24. Until we reach the tree of life, meaning paradise (Rev 2:7),

we hold fast to this life-giving book, and now also to Jesus Christ, the Wisdom of God.

NOTE

16 The LXX adds an ethical element that is out of place in the passage: “Out of her mouth proceeds righteousness, and law and mercy she bears on her tongue.”

b. Wisdom Essential to Creation (3:19 – 20)

19 By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
20 by his knowledge the deeps were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew.

COMMENTARY

19 – 20 Wisdom, understanding, and knowledge are also valuable to God, for by them he created the universe. How wisdom was used in creation and how it pictures Christ, the Wisdom of God, is discussed in the comments on 8:22 – 23 (see also J.Emerton, “Spring and Torrent in Ps. 74:15,” *VTSup* 15 [1965]: 125).This section shows that the wisdom that directs life is the same wisdom that created the universe; to surrender to God’s wisdom is to put oneself in harmony with creation, the world around one (Fritsch, *IB*, 4:804). The two verses concentrate first on the foundation of heaven and earth.

c. Wisdom and a Long and Safe Life (3:21 – 26)

21 My son, preserve sound judgment and discernment,
do not let them out of your sight;
22 they will be life for you,
an ornament to grace your neck.
23 Then you will go on your way in safety,
and your foot will not stumble;
24 when you lie down, you will not be afraid;

when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.
25 Have no fear of sudden disaster or
of the ruin that overtakes the wicked,
26 for the LORD will be your confidence
and will keep your foot from being snared.

COMMENTARY

21 – 26 The speech now concerns the value of wisdom to the son or disciple. This section forms an admonition to keep on the way of wisdom (v.21) along with promises for such compliance (vv.22 – 26). If the disciple diligently preserves sound judgment and discernment, he can be confident that the Lord will guide and protect him. But he cannot let them out of his sight for a moment, as *yāluzū* (lit., "depart") indicates (v.21).

Whoever trusts and follows sound judgment in a life of righteous ness will find not only strength and beauty in wisdom (v.22) but also preservation in action and repose (vv.23 – 24) — in normal life and in times of disaster (vv.25 – 26). In other words, one's life will be enriched (v.22), safe and secure (vv.23 – 24), and without fear (v.25). True spiritual discernment that places its confidence in the Lord will not be disappointed (v.26).

NOTE

21 In the MT the clauses are in reverse order, making the first line difficult since no subject is expressed:"My son, let them not depart from your eyes, keep sound judgment and discernment." The simplest solution is to reverse the clauses (so NIV), instead of inserting a subject (cf. 4:20).

4. Warning to Avoid Unneighborliness (3:27 – 30)

27 Do not withhold good from those who deserve it,
when it is in your power to act.
28 Do not say to your neighbor,
"Come back later; I'll give it tomorrow"
—when you now have it with you.

29 Do not plot harm against your neighbor,
who lives trustfully near you.
30 Do not accuse a man for no reason —
when he has done you no harm.

COMMENTARY

27 – 30 Here is the lesson for the speech. It contains a succession of instructions with regard to neighborliness. These ideas, expressed in the negative, follow naturally from the emphasis on love and faithfulness in v.3. Verses 27 – 28 exhort doing acts of kindness to those in need, for it is wrong to withhold help from a needy neighbor — people ought to be good neighbors. The father also prohibits plotting maliciously against an unsuspecting neighbor (v.29). Malice is a crime; it ruins community. Neither should anyone bring groundless litigation against an innocent neighbor (v.30). The reference may have in mind people who take others to court on the flimsiest accusations (see McKane, 300).

NOTE

27 The MT has “from its possessors” after “do not withhold good”; the LXX has “from the poor” (as though the poor possessed the “good”). The Peshitta and Targum leave it out. Toy, 77, suggests reading “neighbor” instead, as in Hebrew רעיך (*rʿyk*) displays some visual similarity to בעליו (*bʿlyw*). The change seems gratuitous.

5. Warning against Emulating the Wicked (3:31 – 35)

31 Do not envy a violent man
or choose any of his ways,
32 for the LORD detests a perverse man
but takes the upright into his confidence.
33 The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the home of the righteous.
34 He mocks proud mockers
but gives grace to the humble.

35 The wise inherit honor,
but fools he holds up to shame.

COMMENTARY

31 – 35 In dealing with neighbors, one should avoid both envying and emulating (LXX) a violent person (cf. Ps 73:3 – 5). This warning in v.31 is followed by the reasons, expressed in a series of contrasts but essentially arguing that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. The Lord detests the perverse (v.32), curses the house of the wicked (v.33), mocks proud mockers (v.34), and holds fools up to shame (v.25). But he is pleased with the upright (v.32); he blesses their home (v.33), gives grace to the humble (v.34), and bequeaths honor to the wise (v.35). So wise and upright behavior pleases God and results in his blessing.

NOTE

34 The verse uses a strong anthropomorphic idea: “He mocks the proud mockers.” The LXX has a softened interpretation: “The Lord resists the proud” (cf. Jas 4:6; 1Pe 5:5).

F. Admonition to Follow Righteousness and Avoid Wickedness (4:1 – 27)

OVERVIEW

This chapter is comprised of three discourses on the value of wisdom, each including the motifs of instruction, exhortation, command, and motivation.After two introductory verses, the first lecture is on the family heritage (vv.3 – 9).

1. Traditional Teaching and Its Benefits (4:1 – 9)

a. Exhortation to Acquire Traditional Wisdom (4:1 – 4a)

1 Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;
pay attention and gain understanding.
2 I give you sound learning,
so do not forsake my teaching.
3 When I was a boy in my father's house,
still tender, and an only child of my mother,
4 he taught me and said,

COMMENTARY

1 The first discourse begins with a double call, stressing the importance of receiving the teaching.The "instruction" (*mûsar*) is the moral instruction introduced previously (cf. 1:2); it adds self-control and guidance to wisdom.

The significant feature of this discourse is that the teaching is traditional. The plural "sons" suggests that disciples (pupils) are in view and that the father is a teacher (Toy, 84). But the use of "mother" in v.3 and the fact that the teacher-pupil relationship was modeled on the parent-child relationship suggest that a father-children relationship is indicated.Alden, 45, perhaps goes too far in identifying David and Bathsheba as the parents.

2 The tradition being passed on is "sound" — it is the voice of experience. But it must be received;the term *leqah*. ("learning") implies that it requires taking (Plaut, 66). Accordingly, this teaching is designated as tradition.

3 – 4a The concern that these traditional teachings be received is reinforced by personal experience — they were lovingly handed down by his parents. They were ingrained in the author's soul; he has seen them shape his life and prove reliable. So the home continues to be the prominent arena of learning as parents in turn pass on the traditions (see Dt 6:6 – 9). In this section, then, the one teaching strengthens his credibility by informing his sons that it is a shared experience.

NOTE

3 The LXX introduces the idea of "obedient" and "beloved" for רַךְ וְיָחִיד (*rak wᵉyāḥîd*, "still tender, and an only child"), viz., "I also was a son, obedient to a father, beloved in the presence of a mother." This seems to be a free interpretation, if not a translation of a different Hebrew reading. The MT has "tender" and "only one," though *rak* could be "alone" or "only." The Hebrew makes good sense and requires no emendation. The idea is that the body and the character are weak and sensitive because they are inexperienced (Waltke, 1:278).

b. Benefits of Acquired Wisdom (4:4b – 9)

"Lay hold of my words with all your heart;
keep my commands and you will live.
5 Get wisdom, get understanding;
do not forget my words or swerve from them.
6 Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;
love her, and she will watch over you.
7 Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom.
Though it cost all you have, get understanding.
8 Esteem her, and she will exalt you;
embrace her, and she will honor you.
9 She will set a garland of grace on your head
and present you with a crown of splendor."

COMMENTARY

4b Receiving this traditional wisdom wholeheartedly will bring life. "You will live" must mean to experience life with all of its blessings — life as opposed to the whole realm of death, with which it is in conflict (Kidner, 55). Deuteronomy 30 captures the contrast forcefully: people are in a life-and-death struggle, and choosing life means obeying the commandments in order to enjoy God's bounty.This theme of true life appears in each of the discourses (4:4, 10, 22 – 23). Of course, the sage uses this motivation in the general sense, for there are always exceptions, such as Job (Scott, 52).

5 – 6 A second benefit of traditional wisdom is security. After reiterating the exhortation to acquire wisdom and understanding (i.e., perhaps through purchase, for there is a cost for such acquisition), the teacher uses feminine verbs

to promise protection and safety. Here we find Wisdom personified as a woman, at first reading like a bride that is to be loved and embraced (cf. v.8), but also having the qualities of an influential patron who can protect (v.6; cf. McKane, 306). Wisdom personified as a virtuous woman contrasts to the strange woman. If the novice gives wholehearted devotion to wisdom, she will watch over him. Proverbs elaborate how wisdom protects one from the evil man (2:12 – 15), the evil woman (2:16 – 19; 5:1 – 20; ch. 7), and catastrophe (5:22 – 23).

7 – 9 A third benefit is "honor" (*kbd* in v.8).Using an implied comparison here with a valuable object (cf. 3:14 – 15), the teacher implores the disciple to obtain this wisdom at all costs (including the cost of one's heart), for it is of supreme value.The personification continues in these verses, showing that embracing wisdom will bring honor like a wreath on the head. The imagery is that wisdom is a patroness rewarding her lover; wisdom is to be caressed or held dear (see Fox, 179). The honor acquired essentially has to do with the character that wisdom produces; such virtue will be readily recognized in the community (11:10 – 11).

So there are several benefits to be gained from embracing this teaching. The first step is the earnest determination to have it (Greenstone, 39).

NOTE

7 Toy, 88, on the basis of its omission from the LXX, deletes v.7 as an impossible gloss that interrupts vv.6 and 8.

2. Admonition to Live Righteously (4:10 – 19)

a. Pursuit of a Righ teous Lifestyle (4:10 – 13)

10 Listen, my son, accept what I say,
and the years of your life will be many.
11 I guide you in the way of wisdom
and lead you along straight paths.
12 When you walk, your steps will not be hampered;
when you run, you will not stumble.

13 Hold on to instruction, do not let it go;
guard it well, for it is your life.

COMMENTARY

10 The second lecture begins with the repeated admonition to listen carefully to the instruction to stay off the wrong path so that life might be extended. The parallelism explains that the disciple must appropriate (*qaḥ*; "accept," NIV) the life principles of wisdom. Doing so prepares him to discern what is the right way and what is the wrong way in the later collections of sayings.

11 – 12 That this teaching must be appropriated is underscored by the use of *hōrētîkā* ("I guide you"),a verb related to the noun *tôrâ* (see further Driver, "Hebrew Notes," *VT* 1 [1951]: 241 – 50). More specifically, the idea is that of instructing and leading the disciple along. James L. Crenshaw notes how wisdom taught that laws governed the universe and ensured prosperity and harmony ("The Acquisition of Knowledge in Israelite Wisdom Literature," *WW* 7 [1986]: 9).

The figure of a road is now used to make a comparison. Living according to wisdom is like walking or running on a safe road, a course that will be free of obstacles, so that progress will lead to abundant life (see comment on 3:5 – 6). Verse 12 uses two synonymous temporal clauses to fill out the image:when one lives by this teaching (walking and run-ning), nothing will impede progress.

13 Not only is wisdom the means of making progress in life, it is life itself. (The father's instruction and wisdom are equated here with life.) Anything so essential must be enthusiastically guarded.

b. Avoidance of a Wicked Lifestyle (4:14 – 19)

14 Do not set foot on the path of the wicked
or walk in the way of evil men.
15 Avoid it, do not travel on it;
turn from it and go on your way.
16 For they cannot sleep till they do evil;
they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall.

17 They eat the bread of wickedness
and drink the wine of violence.
18 The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn,
shining ever brighter till the full light of day.
19 But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble.

14 – 15 The author gives a warning to avoid evil ways and evil men by not even starting on the wicked path of life. Plaut, 69, rightly paraphrases:“Don’t take the first step, for you may not be the master of your destiny thereafter.”

The rapid sequence of six intensifying imperatives in these verses stresses the urgency of the matter. And the expressions used continue the comparison of lifestyle with a path that can be traveled — only now the lifestyle is evil, masquerading as what is true and right.

16 – 17 The first reason one should avoid such a lifestyle is that it is enslaving — evil becomes the true nature. By using hyperboles the teacher portrays the character of the wicked as those who are addicted to evil (v.16; cf. Ps 36:4). They are so completely devoted to evil conduct that they cannot sleep until they find expression for it. Alden, 47, comments: “How sick to find peace only at the price of another man’s misfortune!”

Moreover, evil is the diet of the wicked (v.17), the figure “bread of wickedness” meaning that wickedness is what the wicked regularly consume.This hyperbole stresses how powerful the influence of evil is in the life of the wicked; to them it is like food and wine (contrast Php 4:8).Verse 17 has been taken also to mean that violence is the way the wicked sustain themselves.

18 – 19 In addition to being enslaved by evil, one should realize that becoming involved with evil is dangerous. Similes make the contrast vivid.The path of the righteous is like the morning sun;it is secure and clear like the bright light of the daytime that shines brighter and brighter (“dawn”and “day” may form a merism to express that this light is constant; v.18). By contrast, the way of the wicked is insecure and dangerous, like darkness in which people stumble (v.19). The right path is like the morning sun, which grows brighter, not like the evening sun, which grows dim.

NOTE

18 For the noun “dawn” or “morning sun,” the LXX has a verbal translation: “The ways of the righteous shine like light.” But the contrast in v.19 is with a nominal form: “darkness.” The editors of the *BHS* propose transposing vv.18 and 19 or deleting the ו (*waw*) at the beginning of v.18.

3. Admonition to Concentrate on Righteous Living (4:20 – 27)

a. Exhortation to the Father’s Teaching (4:20 – 22)

20 My son, pay attention to what I say;
listen closely to my words.
21 Do not let them out of your sight,
keep them within your heart;
22 for they are life to those who find them
and health to a man’s whole body.

COMMENTARY

20 – 21 The exhortation in this third discourse uses several terms for parts of the body.The disciple must use the ears to listen closely to the teacher’s words, the eyes to watch them closely, and the heart to determine to do them. By using the ears, eyes, and heart, the teacher exhorts the whole person to receive the traditions, that is, to walk straight ahead and not swerve to the right or the left (cf. v.27).

22 The reason for giving heed to instruction once again is that the words of wisdom provide life and health, the implication being a restoration to full life. The health that is promised here is physical, emotional, and spiritual — the whole person. It is made possible because of God’s words, which bring deliverance from the harmful evils that hinder life.

b. Concentration on Righ teous ness (4:23 – 27)

23 Above all else, guard your heart,
for it is the wellspring of life.

24 Put away perversity from your mouth;
keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
25 Let your eyes look straight ahead,
fix your gaze directly before you.
26 Make level paths for your feet
and take only ways that are firm.
27 Do not swerve to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil.

COMMENTARY

23 In this instruction for righteous ness, the parts of the body that are used are those involved with expression or action. First, the "heart" (i.e.,the mind or will, the source of choices) must be guarded diligently. Verse 21 instructed the disciple to guard wisdom in the heart. Now the heart must be watched over and restrained from evil, for the heart is the "wellspring of life," the starting point of the activities of life (16:9; 23:19); the heart determines the course of life (see R. J. Bouffier, "The Heart in the Proverbs of Solomon," *TBT* 52 [1971]:249 – 51).

24 Righteous ness will control the tongue by averting it from twisted and crooked speech. This step is the next logical one to take; it is not enough to guard the heart without watching what the heart produces, for words flow out of the heart. Wisdom produces truthful speech (8:13; 10:32; et al.). Scott,52, reminds us that "falsehood and dissimulation are repeatedly condemned by wisdom teachers"; he refers to "Amenemope" and "Ahiqar" (cf. *ANET*, 423, 429).

25 Next, the eyes must be focused on proper goals so that the wise person does not swerve from the path (the image of the road being resumed here). The wise person will have unwavering directness, but the fool is easily distracted (17:24). To look straight in front means that one has a fixed goal.

26 – 27 Here the focus is on the foot. The imagery of the level, firm, and straight path is used again in these final verses to advise the disciple to avoid evil actions. There is no middle way: one must reject the wrong way and follow the right way every step on the road of life.

NOTE

27 The LXX adds a bit of a homily: “For the way of the right hand God knows, but those of the left are distorted; and he himself will make straight your paths and guide your goings in peace.”This addition is unnecessary, for the text is clear as it stands. For a brief discussion on the question of whether this addition is Jewish or early Chris tian, see Toy, 99.

G. Admonition to Avoid Seduction (5:1 – 23)

OVERVIEW

1 – 2 Chapters 5 and 6 now elaborate earlier warnings against pursuing easy money and sex from evil men and women. In chapter 5 we have a man-to-man warning to avoid liaisons with loose women, a fairly common theme in the wisdom literature of the ancient Near East (McKane, 312; for an analysis of the arrangement of the chapter, see John E. Goldingay, “Proverbs V and IX,” *RB* 84 [1977]: 80 – 93). The structure of the passage includes an introductory address and call to attentiveness (vv.1 – 2), reasons for following the advice (vv.3 – 6), warning of the great folly (vv.7 – 14), a reminder of the wisdom of marriage (vv.15 – 20), and finally some conclusions and consequences (vv.21 – 23; see further Waltke, 1:305).

1. A Father’s Warning about Deadly Seduction (5:1 – 6)

a. Exhortation for Discretion (5:1 – 2)

1 My son, pay attention to my wisdom,
listen well to my words of insight,
2 that you may maintain discretion
and your lips may preserve knowledge.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 This initial exhortation is for the son to listen carefully to this warning that he may keep discretion and knowledge. This knowledge and "discretion" (*mᵉzimmôt*, GK 4659, is used elsewhere in a bad sense but here signifying wise, prudent consideration) will be basic for avoiding temptation to such disastrous folly.

b. Motivation: With Wisdom Seduction May Be Avoided (5:3 – 6)

3 For the lips of an adulteress drip honey,
and her speech is smoother than oil;
4 but in the end she is bitter as gall,
sharp as a double-edged sword.
5 Her feet go down to death;
her steps lead straight to the grave.
6 She gives no thought to the way of life;
her paths are crooked, but she knows it not.

COMMENTARY

3 The reason the disciple should guard discretion is that the adulteress is seductive. *Zārâ* ("strange woman," elsewhere "harlot") is taken here, as in ch.7, to be a married woman, an unchaste wife. The father's warning assumes that the son is married or soon will be married. But the main point the text makes is that her words are flattering — they draw him to excitement, delight, and mystery (McKane, 314). The images of dripping honey and smooth oil refer to her words, not her kisses (cf. SS 4:11;see also M. Dahood, "Honey That Drips: Notes on Proverbs 5:2 – 3," *Bib* 54 [1973]: 65 – 66).

4 The teacher uncovers corruption under the adulteress's charm; Proverbs does not allow us to forget that there is an afterward, when she is "bitter" (*mārâ*) as "wormwood" (*laʿᵃnâ*) (see Kidner, 65). The reference in the MT is to the aromatic plant in contrast to the sweetness of honey. Some, however, follow the LXX with "gall" (so NIV). Plaut, 74, keenly observes that there is sweetness insofar as the tryst has alluring glamour, but afterward it has an ugly ring. The image of the two-edged sword (lit., a sword with more than one mouth) signifies that a liaison with this woman brings pain and destruction. The flattery conceals for a time the harmful side of this sin.

5 – 6 In fact, the wayward woman's lifestyle is the pathway to death. In this passage *šeʾôl*("grave," NIV; GK 8619) is not just the realm of the unblessed, for it is paralleled with "death" *(māwet)*. Although these terms could be hyperbolic for a ruined life, they probably convey a note of the real consequences that exist for a life of debauchery. Those who abandon God walk aimlessly and ignorantly in darkness, which is death. The sadder part of this description is that the *zārâ* does not know how unstable her life is (v.6; but see D. W. Thomas for the interpretation "she is not tranquil" in "A Note on *lōʾ tēdāʿ* in Proverbs 5:6," *JTS* 37 [1936]: 59).

2. A Father's Warning to Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:7 – 14)

a. Exhortation for Prevention (5:7 – 8)

7 Now then, my sons, listen to me;
do not turn aside from what I say.
8 Keep to a path far from her,
do not go near the door of her house,

COMMENTARY

7 – 8 This next part concerns the folly of adultery.It begins with a warning not to turn aside from the father's teaching. One mistake can ruin the family.Going to the adulteress would be such a turning aside, and so the writer strongly warns, "Keep clear"(as Moffat has it); do not even go near her door.(Note the wordplay between *rāḥaq*["Keep . . . far"]and *qārab*["go near"] in these verses.) The disciple should avoid her house completely — it is a place of death.

b. Motivation: Obedience Will Avoid Ruin and Regret (5:9 – 14)

9 lest you give your best strength to others
and your years to one who is cruel,
10 lest strangers feast on your wealth
and your toil enrich another man's house.
11 At the end of your life you will groan,
when your flesh and body are spent.
12 You will say, "How I hated discipline!
How my heart spurned correction!

13 I would not obey my teachers
or listen to my instructors.
14 I have come to the brink of utter ruin
in the midst of the whole assembly."

COMMENTARY

9 – 10 The first part of the writer's motivation is the warning that consorting with an adulteress will rob a person of health and prosperity (v.9).These verses begin with "lest" (*pen*), introducing negative consequences. The theme here is that the hard-earned substance can pass over to "strangers"(*zar*m*îm*, v.10). The "strength" (*hôd* , v.9) may refer to health and vigor that might be relinquished to a cruel enemy, perhaps an offended husband as in ch.7 (although a husband is not mentioned here).

The "years," the best years in the prime of life, signify what those years have produced, what a person has worked for. Likewise the "wealth" (*kōaḥ*) in v.10 refers to the produce that laborious toiling has gained, the family's hard-earned fortune. The point of these verses is clear: The price of infidelity may be high, for everything one has worked for — position, power, prosperity — can be lost either through the avaricious demands of the woman or the outcry for restitution by the community.

11 – 14 When the foolish participant is ruined in such a way, there will be regret for not heeding the warnings. This theme is introduced with "you will groan" (*nāhamtā*), , a term used elsewhere for the loud groaning of the poor and distressed (Eze 24:23). Here the verb conveys an elemental, animal cry of anguish when the guilty finds himself destitute (McKane, 317). The use of both "flesh" and "body" underscores the fact that the whole body is exhausted.

Next begins what Alden, 51, calls a long litany of "if onlys." The condemned conscience realizes too late that instruction and reproof have been ignored. If the disciple listens to his teacher and heeds his warnings, he will be spared of "utter ruin" (*kol-rāʿ*, , v.14) and the remorse of wrong choices.

NOTE

11 The LXX interprets נָהַמְתָּה (*nāhamtâ*, "groan, mourn") as נָהַמְתָּה (*nāhamtâ*, "repent"), viz., "And you repent at the last when the flesh of your body is consumed." Without vocalization they apparently thought of the common word נחם (*nḥm*) as having an ethical emphasis.

3. Advice to Find Satisfaction at Home (5:15 – 23)

a. Avoid Sharing Love with Strangers (5:15 – 17)

15 Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.
16 Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?
17 Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.

COMMENTARY

15 – 17 The theme here is that the enjoyment of sex in marriage enables people to avoid temptations.By using high figures the wise teacher instructs the son to find sexual satisfaction with his own wife and not strange women. The figures used here have troubled commentators because they are not common in instruction material (see McKane, 317).

But Kruger develops the section as an allegory consisting of a series of metaphors, and this approach seems satisfactory. He contends that what is at issue is a private versus a common claim. The images of a cistern, well, or fountain are used of a wife (see v.18b;SS 4:15) because she, like water, satisfies desires. Channels of water in the street then signify sexual contact with lewd women. According to Proverbs 7:12, the lewd woman never stays at home but instead is in the streets and the property of many (Paul A. Kruger, "Promiscuity or Marriage Fidelity? A Note on Prov. 5:15 – 18," *JNSL* 13 [1987]: 61 – 68). So the young man is advised to spend his sexual energy at home, producing children (see Sir 26:19 – 21) rather than giving himself to "strangers" (*zārîm*;.

NOTE

15 For “cistern” the LXX has “vessel.” While the change may be only slight and retain the basic idea of the passage, the Hebrew imagery means that the wife is to be a source of true pleasure, not an everyday instrument for mere physical satisfaction.

b. Finding Satisfaction with One’s Wife (5:18 – 19)

18 May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.
19 A loving doe, a graceful deer —
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated by her love.

COMMENTARY

18 The advice is now plainly given — the proper course of action is to find pleasure in a fulfilling marriage. Proverbs clearly indicates that marriage is to be monogamous, contracted early, and then maintained throughout life. The first line, calling for the “fountain” to be blessed, indicates that sexual delight is God-given; therefore, one should rejoice in the wife who has from the vigor of youth shared the excitement and satisfaction, the joy and the contentment of a divinely blessed, monogamous relationship (see Mal 2:15).

19 The imagery for intimate love in marriage is now drawn from the animal world. The “doe” and “deer” illustrate the exquisite gracefulness of a loving wife. The translation “gazelle” also is used (see *ZPEB*, 2:665). (Women frequently were named after pretty and graceful animals [e.g., Tabitha/Dor-cas in Acts 9:36].) The husband should be “captivated” (*tišgeh*) by the love of his wife.The word *šāgâ* signifies a staggering gait and so here expresses the ecstatic joy of a “captivated” lover. It may even suggest “be intoxicated always with her love.”

NOTE

18 For the Hebrew “let your fountain be blessed,” the LXX reads, “Let your fountain be your own,” possibly reading לְבַדֶּךָ (*l*ᵉ*baddekā*) for בָּרוּךְ (*bārûk*).

c. Motivation: Adultery is Sinful Folly (5:20 – 23)

20 Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?
Why embrace the bosom of another man’s wife?
21 For a man’s ways are in full view of the LORD,
and he examines all his paths.
22 The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him;
the cords of his sin hold him fast.
23 He will die for lack of discipline,
led astray by his own great folly.

COMMENTARY

20 In view of the divine plan for marital love, sexual involvement outside marriage is folly. So now the teacher shows the folly of adultery by raising rhetorical questions. Here he repeats the *šāgâ* of v.19 (“captivated”) but with the connotation of foolish delirium: “Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress [*zārâ*]?” ? Common sense says that such brief liaisons with strangers give no time for intimacy; that requires a lifelong bonding with the wife of one’s youth.

21 The conclusion is based on theology: God’s knowledge and justice. The practical point is that a person’s ways are in clear view of the Lord, who examines them. No matter how careful someone might be to conceal sin, nothing can be concealed from God. Anyone who does not factor in God’s omniscience will get entangled in sin.

22 – 23 In sum, the lack of discipline and control in the area of sexual gratification is destructive. This principle harmonizes with the theology of the justice of God; wicked acts bring death in God’s administration. Accordingly, the one who plays with this kind of sin will become ensnared by it and led off to ruin.Verse 23 uses *šāgâ* again (“led astray,” NIV), only this time to underscore that the crime spawns the punishment: “in the greatness of his folly he will *reel*” (my trans.). In other words, if the young man is not *captivated* by his wife but becomes *captivated* with a stranger in sinful acts, then his own iniquities will

captivate him; and he will be led to ruin. Judgment, in one form or another, is inevitable.

NOTE

22 The Hebrew line is difficult; it reads literally, "his iniquities shall catch him, the wicked." Since אֶת־הָרָשָׁע (*ʾet-hārāšāʿ*, "the wicked") is not represented in the LXX, it could be an old scribal error; or the LXX may have simply smoothed out the sentence. Toy, 117, suggests turning the sentence into a passive idea: "The wicked shall be caught in his iniquities." The NIV rearranges it to read, "The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him."

H. Admonition to Seek Release from a Foolish Indebtedness (6:1 – 5)

1. Conditions of Indebtedness (6:1 – 2)

1 My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
if you have struck hands in pledge for another,
2 if you have been trapped by what you said,
ensnared by the words of your mouth,

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 In the biblical world it was common for someone to put up security for someone else, that is, to underwrite another person's debts. Here the guarantee of surety is graphically represented by the image of striking hands (v.1; cf. 11:15; 17:18; 22:26);but the pledge is a foolish one, for the debtor is a neighbor who is a misfit (*rēaʿ . . . zār*, lit., "neighbor . . . stranger"). The guarantor was under no obligation to put up the security — it was merely an impulsive act of generosity. A gullible young man might lack judgment and be easily swept in, only to realize too late that he was "trapped" (*yāqaš*; v.2) and "ensnared" (*lākad*). Some rash act of generosity might take a lifetime to repay.

2. Exhortation to Obtain Release (6:3 – 5)

3 then do this, my son, to free yourself,
since you have fallen into your neighbor's hands:
Go and humble yourself;
press your plea with your neighbor!
4 Allow no sleep to your eyes,
no slumber to your eyelids.
5 Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
like a bird from the snare of the fowler.

COMMENTARY

3 – 4 The advice for the indebted person is to try to get released from the pledge as soon as possible (*ʾēpô*, signifying "here and now"; "then," NIV). The full array of imperatives used in this section stresses the need for immediate attention to the situation. Freeing oneself (*hinnāṣēl* having the force of rescuing or delivering oneself from a situation) may be a humiliating process, but it is far better than the indebtedness.

The verb "humble yourself " (*hinnāṣēl*; GK 8346) may have behind it the literal idea of allowing oneself to be trampled on (which Gesenius interpreted to mean "prostrate yourself " [*Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (London: Samuel Bagster and Son, 1847), 777]). G. R. Driver related it to the Akkadian *rapas*m*u* ("trample") and interpreted it in the sense of trampling oneself or swallowing pride, with the implication of being unremitting in the effort ("Some Hebrew Verbs, Nouns, and Pronouns," *JTS* 30 [1929]: 374). This purpose for the humbling is "to press [the] plea"(*rᵉhab*, from *rāhab*, "to act stormily, boisterously" — here "to importune"). The pledge can be released if one begs the creditor, but one should lose no time in pressing the appeal.

5The exhortation is then enhanced by two similes that retrieve the motif of the person's being entrapped by the pledge. A gazelle that has been caught in a corral and a bird that has been caught in a trap give their full attention to escaping the difficulty.

I. Admonition to Avoid Laziness (6:6 – 11)

1. Lesson in Diligence (6:6 – 8)

6 Go to the ant, you sluggard;
consider its ways and be wise!
7 It has no commander,
no overseer or ruler,
8 yet it stores its provisions in summer
and gathers its food at harvest.

COMMENTARY

6 The teacher next directs a lesson to the sluggard (*ʿāṣēl,* "to be sluggish, lazy") by using the activities of the ant to make the point (cf. a parallel section in 24:30 – 34, where the emphasis is on the neglected field of the sluggard). By even giving such instruction the teacher indicates that there is still hope for the sluggard. The teacher instructs him to learn from the ant. Since the ant is a lowly creature, this comparison is somewhat degrading;but the sluggard can learn diligence from its ways.

7 – 8 The description of the ant's activities shows that although it appears to have no leader (even though it actually does have organization and cooperation), it provides for the future with great industry. The word *tākîn*("it stores," from *kûn*) means to put things in their proper order or preparedness — especially food for bad times that might come. The classic example of such foresight and industry is Joseph in Genesis 41. (For a treatment of wisdom motifs in the story of Joseph, see Gerhard von Rad, *God at Work in Israel* [trans. John H. Marks; Nashville: Abingdon, 1980], 19 – 35.)

NOTE

8 The LXX adds a lengthy section at the end of this verse on the lesson from the bee: "Or, go to the bee and learn how diligent she is and how seriously she does her work, her products kings and private persons use for health; she is desired and respected by all, though feeble in body, by honoring wisdom she

obtains distinction.” Toy, 124, surmises that the LXX translator thought the other insect ought to be mentioned and so elaborated the point.

2. Danger of Poverty (6:9 – 11)

9 How long will you lie there, you sluggard?
When will you get up from your sleep?
10 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest —
11 and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

COMMENTARY

9 – 11 These verses provide the motivation for the admonition, for the danger of poverty exists.The rhetorical question (“How long [ʿad-māṯay] will you lie there, you sluggard?” v.9) is designed to rebuke laziness in a forceful manner. The wording assumes that the harvest is now in progress and the sluggard should be at work. But the sluggard does not respond; his preference is to sleep, to escape either pain or responsibilities. Thus, using effective irony the instructor mimics the lazy person’s speech (v.10). His point is that too much sleep will lead to poverty; it will rob the lazy person of potential increase.

Two similes in v.11 illustrate the onslaught of poverty personified. (1) Poverty will come “like a bandit” (*mᵉhallēk*). This difficult term has been interpreted as a “dangerous assailant” or a “highwayman,” i.e., a bandit that robs. McKane, 324, however, takes the view that it means a “vagrant.”(2) “Armed man” (*ʾîš māgēn*) is probably connected to the military ideas of “shield” and “deliver” (*gānan*, “to cover, surround, defend”). G. R. Driver connects it with the Arabic word for “bold, insolent”and interprets its use here as “beggar” or “insolent man” (“Studies in the Vocabulary of the Old Testament, IV,” *JTS* 33 [1932]: 38 – 47).

NOTE

11 The MT has “your poverty will come like a wayfarer”; the LXX has “swiftness of a traveler.” The parallelism suggests that one traveling swiftly

would be a robber or an assailant. The imagery, then, is of a swift attack that brings poverty.

J. Warning against Deviousness (6:12 – 15)

1. Description (6:12 – 14)

12 A scoundrel and villain,
who goes about with a corrupt mouth,
13 who winks with his eye,
signals with his feet and motions with his fingers,
14 who plots evil with deceit in his heart —
he always stirs up dissension.

COMMENTARY

12 – 14 The subject matter is now the "evil scoundrel" or "troublemaker" (*ʾādām bᵉlîyyaᶜal*) and the "malevolent person" or "villain" (*ʾîšʾāwen*).These terms describe one who is both wicked and worthless. Gesenius (cf. also BDB) analyzes *bᵉlîyyaᶜal* (GK 1175) as a compound of the negative *bᵉlî* and a noun *yaᶜal* ("worth, profit"). But there are other proposals for its etymology, such as a compound with *baᶜal* ("lord of goats," related to *ʾazazel*), a derivative of *bālaᶜ* with reduplication ("confusion" or "engulfing ruin"), and a proper name from Babylonian "Bililu"(see Benedikt Otzen, "בְּלִיַּעַל [*bᵉlîyaᶜal*]," *TDOT*, 2:131 – 36; D. Winton Thomas, "בְּלִיַּעַל in the Old Testament," in *Biblical and Patristic Studies in Memory of Robert Pierce Casey* [ed. J. N. Birdsall and R. W.Thomson; New York: Herder, 1963], 11 – 19).

Whatever the word's etymology, a survey of its use shows that it describes troublemakers of all kinds who violate the law (Dt 15:9; Jdg 19:22; 1Ki 21:10, 13; Pr 16:27) or who act in a contemptuous or foolish manner against cultic observance or social institutions (1Sa 10:27; 25:17; 30:22). The instruction will focus on the devious activities of this type of person.

The description moves from the scoundrel's corrupt or perverse sayings (v.12)

to his sinister sign language (v.13) to his disruptive plots developed through deceit.The expressions in v.13 seem to refer to any look or gesture that is put on and therefore a form of deception, if not a way of making insinuations. A wink may seem like a playful thing, but with these troublemakers it is malicious. McKane, 325, thinks there is even a reference here to magic, as "plots" (*ḥōrēš*, v.14) is used elsewhere to devise magic. The evil plans of their hearts are a vivid reminder of the description of the wicked in Genesis 6:5.

2. Destruction (6:15)

15 Therefore disaster will overtake him in an instant;
he will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.

COMMENTARY

15 Disaster will befall the troublemaker suddenly.It is uncertain whether or not *yiššab*m*er* m ("he will be destroyed") refers to death. Probably the line means that a character like this will be ruined when exposed. Still, the disaster must be seen as evidence of God's wrath; the ultimate disaster will be eternal death.

K. Conduct the Lord Hates (6:16 – 19)

1. Introductory Statement (6:16)

16 There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

COMMENTARY

16 The verses that follow this one condemn certain characteristics and activities; the terms "hate"and "detestable" show that these are taboo. By saying that the Lord hates them, the writer means that God is opposed to them, separate from them, and will punish those who do them. Since he hates these practices, those who do them cannot remain in his presence.

The text lists several of the things as misused body parts and then describes two evil actions.These seven traits are probably still describing the troublemaker of the last section. Plaut, 89, perceives that these vices deny the divine element in humanity. Verse 16 uses what is known as a numerical ladder by paralleling "six things" with "seven things"(see also 30:15, 18, 21, 24, 29; Job 5:19; Ecc 11:2;Am 1:6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; Mic 5:5).The point of such a poetic arrangement is that the present enumeration does not exhaust the list (cf. Toy, 127; Roth, "The Numerical Sequence x / x + 1 in the Old Testament," 300 – 11; idem, "Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament," 86).

2. Delineation (6:17 – 19)

17 haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
18 a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
19 a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

COMMENTARY

17 – 19 The seven things that the Lord hates are specific, personal attitudes and actions.There is something of a contrasting parallel arrangement with the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, where seven blessed things answer these seven hated things. Moreover, the first beatitude ("Blessed are the poor in spirit," Mt 5:5) contrasts with the first hated thing ("haughty eyes," i.e., "a proud look," Pr 6:17) and the seventh ("Blessed are the peacemakers," Mt 5:7) with the seventh abomination ("stirs up dissension," Pr 6:19).

The first on the list, "haughty eyes" (*ʿênayim rāmôt;* v.17a), refers to a proud look suggesting arrogant ambition. The writer is starting at the top, and so the eyes are listed first; but they are also listed first because the pride seen in them is the opposite of the humility of wisdom. The term "haughty/high" is similarly used in Numbers 15:30 for the sin of the high hand, i.e., willful rebellion or defiant sin. Usage of "haughty eyes" in the OT is telling: it describes the pompous Assyrian

invader in Isaiah 10:12 – 14 as well as the proud king in Daniel 11:12 (“pride,” NIV). God will not tolerate anyone who thinks so highly of himself (see Pr 21:4; Isa 2:11 – 17).

The second description is “a lying tongue” (*lᵉšôn šāqer,* lit., “tongue of deception”). The term is used in Jeremiah 14:14 to portray false prophets who deceive people and in Psalm 109:2 to describe the deceiver who betrays — a passage that the disciples apply to Judas in Acts 1:20. Deception in speech is harmful (Pr 26:28), but in the end truth will overcome it (12:19).

The third description focuses on the hands as the instruments of murder (v.17c). Genesis 9:6 prohibited shedding human blood because people have been made in the image of God — no matter what one might think of them. But shedding “innocent blood” (*dām-nāqî*) is an even greater crime. King Manasseh had filled the streets with innocent blood (2Ki 21:16; 24:4). Princes did it for gain according to Ezekiel 22:27. Even King David was prohibited from building the temple because he had shed much blood (1Ch 22:8).

Appropriately, at the center of the list, the fourth phrase (v.18a) concerns the heart that “devises [*ḥōrēš*] wicked schemes [*maḥᵃšᵉbôt ʾāwen*].” The heart most often represents the will, which here plots evil. God early on declared that the human heart was capable of doing this sort of thing (Ge 6:5); Proverbs elaborates the theme by showing that the heart that schemes wickedness is also deceitful (Pr 12:20; 14:22).

The fifth description uses the figure of “feet that are quick to rush into evil.” This captures the enthusiastic and complete involvement in activities that bring pain to all concerned

.The sixth abomination (v.19a) returns to the theme of deception, but now the text uses participial expressions. In this line the focus is on perjury (*ʿēd šāqer,* “a false witness,” NIV), a direct violation of the Decalogue. This character pours out “lies” (*kᵉzābîm,*also found in Ps 40:4; Am 2:4; Mic 1:14 [where the wordplay on the city of Achzib also carries the idea of a false expectation; cf. Jer 15:18, where the adjective *ʾakzāb* describes a mirage]).

The final description is general: God hates one “who stirs up dissension.”

“Dissension” is attributed in proverbs to contentious, quarreling people (21:9; 26:21; 25:24), who have a short fuse (15:18). Paul, by contrast, warns against envy, malice, and strife (1Ti 6:4). These things, then, God will not tolerate. If he hates these things, conversely he must love and desire (1) humility, (2) truthful speech, (3) preservation of life, (4) pure thoughts, (5) eagerness to do good things, (6) honest witnesses, and (7) peaceful harmony.

NOTE

18b The MT has (lit.) “make haste to run,” the idea’s being to make haste to begin to run, i.e., to be eager to seize the opportunity. The LXX omits “run,” yielding the idea of feet hastening to do evil. The word “run” is unnecessary in the line, if the analogy of 1:16 (which has only one verb in each clause) holds.

L. Warning about Immorality (6:20 – 35)

OVERVIEW

This closing section, like the beginning of ch.5, expands the warning of 2:16 – 19. Here the introduction and conclusion are written in the second person; the rest of the address is in the third person.

1. Reminder to Heed Instruction (6:20 – 24)

20 My son, keep your father’s commands
and do not forsake your mother’s teaching.
21 Bind them upon your heart forever;
fasten them around your neck.
22 When you walk, they will guide you;
when you sleep, they will watch over you;
when you awake, they will speak to you.
23 For these commands are a lamp,
this teaching is a light,
and the corrections of discipline

are the way to life,
24 keeping you from the immoral woman,
from the smooth tongue of the wayward wife.

COMMENTARY

20 – 21 The youth is exhorted to cling fast to the teachings of his parents (see P. W. Skehan, *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom: Proverbs 5:15 – 19 and 6:20 – 24* [Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971], 1 – 8). Implicit in these verses is the basic understanding that a good home life (i.e., father and mother sharing the rearing of the children together) will go a long way to prevent youth from falling into immorality. But the teachings must become a permanent part of the youth's thinking; they must be memorized and practiced.

22 – 24 The motivation for keeping these commands is that they will bring protection from the adulteress. Verse 22 strengthens the instruction by using language similar to Deuteronomy 6:7; and v.23 uses metaphors that are also used of the law (see Ps 119:105). But beside the general ideas of protection and direction, the specific benefit of the teaching will be in keeping the youth from the loose woman. She is described in v.24 as an "immoral woman" (*ʾēšet rāʿ*) and a "wayward wife" (*nokrîyâ*; some commentators follow the variant reading ,(*ʾēšet rāʿ*) "the wife of another man," as in the LXX).The context shows that this immoral woman is another man's wife.

NOTE

24 The parallelism supports the reading "wife of another," i.e., a married woman, as in the LXX. The difference in readings is but one vowel change.

2. Warning to Avoid Seduction (6:25 – 35)

25 Do not lust in your heart after her beauty
or let her captivate you with her eyes,
26 for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread,
and the adulteress preys upon your very life.
27 Can a man scoop fire into his lap

without his clothes being burned?
28 Can a man walk on hot coals
without his feet being scorched?
29 So is he who sleeps with another man's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.
30 Men do not despise a thief if he steals
to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
31 Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
though it costs him all the wealth of his house.
32 But a man who commits adultery lacks judgment;
whoever does so destroys himself.
33 Blows and disgrace are his lot,
and his shame will never be wiped away;
34 for jealousy arouses a husband's fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes revenge.
35 He will not accept any compensation;
he will refuse the bribe, however great it is.

COMMENTARY

25 The admonition warns against lusting in one's heart for the immoral woman's beauty or charm.The verb *ḥāmad* ("to lust," GK 2773) is used in the Decalogue to warn against coveting,so here the verse warns against coveting the immoral woman. Lust, according to Jesus, is a sin of the same kind as the act, not just the first step toward the sin (Mt 5:28). Playing with temptation is only the heart reaching out after the sin. So one's heart should not dwell on the woman's seductive charms. "Eyes" are singled out here because the painted eyes and the luring glances are devices of seduction (see 2Ki 9:30).

26 The summary motivation for the admonition is that such sin has a high price — it may even ruin one's life. The parallelism in this verse is difficult. It is not meant to say that whoring is better than adultery because it only impoverishes, whereas adultery preys on the very life. But it does make the contrast that the prostitute will be satisfied with a small amount of pay, whereas the adulteress demands more. Both are costly sins to be avoided, but one is much more costly.

27 – 35 The motivation now elaborates the motif that punishment is

inevitable. (For the use of questions here, see James L. Crenshaw, “Impossible Questions, Sayings, and Tasks,” *Semeia* 17 [1980]:19 – 34.) Playing on the word ,ʾîš(“man”) and ,ʾiššâ(“woman,” v.26), the instructor introduces the figure of “fire” (ʾēš, v.27). Scooping coals into one’s lap represents holding the adulteress, and walking on coals (v.28) signifies further sexual contact with her.The self-evident answer to the questions is that the adulterer will “get burned”; he will not go “unpunished” (v.29;“touches her” is probably a euphemism for sexual contact as in Ge 20:6).

The rest of the passage reasons that there is no restitution acceptable for adultery as there might be with thievery. The thief, when caught, has to pay dearly (v.31). But the adulterer will be humiliated and ruined. Nothing will satisfy the husband but revenge. He will accept no payoff; he cannot be bought off in this situation.

The expression “destroys himself ” (*mašḥît napšô*) in v.32 stresses that the guilty one destroys his own life. He could be given the death penalty (Dt 22:22);but, destroyed spiritually and socially, he apparently continues to live in ignominy (see Pr 2:18; 1Ti 5:6).Kidner, 75, observes that in a morally healthy society the adulterer would be a social outcast.

NOTE

26 In the first clause of this verse, בְּעַד (*bᵉʿad*) may be taken either as “on account of ” (= by means of) a harlot or “for the price of ” a harlot. Fox, 232, suggests “in exchange for.” Most expositors take the first reading (though that use of the preposition *be* is unattested) and supply “one is brought down.” The verse then says that a harlot brings a man to poverty, but the man joined to an adulterer seeks death. If the second reading is taken (with the support of the ancient versions), then it is saying that there is a small price for the one and a greater price for the other.

M. Admonition to Avoid the Wiles of the Adulteress (7:1 – 27)

OVERVIEW

Once again the theme of seduction surfaces in the instructions of the father (cf. 2:16 – 18; 5:1 – 23;6:20 – 35). Here the instruction takes the form of a narrative about an individual woman's seductive tactics that draw a youth into adultery. It is a didactive narrative that serves to make an earnest warning. The adulteress is probably not a personification of evil in this chapter; that is fully developed in ch. 9. But reference to wisdom as a sister prepares for the personifications of chs. 8 and 9. Wisdom will obviate temptations, the greatest being the sexual urge.

1. Important Teaching of the Father (7:1 – 5)

1 My son, keep my words
and store up my commands within you.
2 Keep my commands and you will live;
guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.
3 Bind them on your fingers;
write them on the tablet of your heart.
4 Say to wisdom, "You are my sister,"
and call understanding your kinsman;
5 they will keep you from the adulteress,
from the wayward wife with her seductive words.

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 The section begins by repeating the instruction for the son to preserve and practice the authoritative teachings in order to "live" (*wehyēh*; v.2). The expression "the apple of your eye" (*ʾîšôn ʿêneykā*, v.2) is literally "the little man in your eye,"having reference to the pupil, where the object focused on is reflected. The point is that this teaching is so precious it must be guarded that closely.Verse 3 strengthens the admonition by alluding to the instruction for heeding the law given in Deuteronomy 6:8. The images used stress the memorization and retention of the teachings. Additionally, spiritual success will take a marriage-like commitment to following the teachings of wisdom.

5 The reason for following these teachings carefully is to give protection from

the wiles of the loose woman. She is called an “adulteress” (*ʾiššâ zārâ*) and a “wayward wife” (*nokrîyâ*; cf. 6:24). There is some debate over her status. McKane, 334, contends that she is a foreigner and devotee of a false god. Snijders, 85 – 86, however, argues that she is an outsider because of her loose morals. The distinction makes little practical difference, for she is a wayward wife with “seductive words” (*ʾᵃmāreyhā heḥᶜlîqâ*, lit., “smooth words”). Helmer Ringgren and Walther Zimmerli suggest that she is a promoter of a pagan cult (*Sprüche/Prediger* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980], 19).

NOTE

1 Before v.2 the LXX inserts, “My son, fear the Lord and you shall be strong, and besides him fear no other.” Although this addition has the precedent of 3:7, 9 and harmonizes with 14:26, it does not fit here. The advice is to listen to the teacher.

2. Description of Seduction (7:6 – 23)

a. The Victim (7:6 – 9)

6 At the window of my house
I looked out through the lattice.
7 I saw among the simple,
I noticed among the young men,
a youth who lacked judgment.
8 He was going down the street near her corner,
walking along in the direction of her house
9 at twilight, as the day was fading,
as the dark of night set in.

COMMENTARY

6 – 9 The narrative unfolds with the observation of an unwary youth strolling along the streets at night.He is described as one of the “simple” (*pᵉtāʾyim*; v.7; cf. 1:4) ones, i.e., “a youth who lacked judgment” (*naᶜar ḥᵃsar-lēb*, lit., “a youth lacking of heart,” i.e.,one devoid of common sense or understanding).He is young,

inexperienced, featherbrained (as Kid-ner, 75, puts it). His refusal to commit to following the teachings of wisdom makes him easy prey for the experienced seductress. His evening stroll takes him intentionally (as suggested by *ṣāʿad*, "to step, march"; "walking along," NIV) down the street to her house (v.8). And if all this activity of the naive young man takes place under cover of night, only trouble can follow (v.9).

b. The Temptress (7:10 – 12)

10 Then out came a woman to meet him,
dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent.
11 (She is loud and defiant,
her feet never stay at home;
12 now in the street, now in the squares,
at every corner she lurks.)

COMMENTARY

10 The narrative next introduces the seductress who comes out to meet the innocent youth. She has the attire of a prostitute and has crafty intent (*nᵉṣurat lēb*). This latter expression is difficult; the ancient versions took it with the meaning of causing the youth's heart to flutter or of bewildering or capturing his heart. The expression literally means "guarded in heart," but Driver has shown the word's semantic development from "guarded"to "crafty, sly." She has locked up her plans and gives nothing away. But her bold attire gives her away — she knows her victim and comes boldly to trap the gullible youth. She will be more successful than Potiphar's wife was with Joseph, because this youth lacks strong convictions.

11 – 12 The text further describes this wayward woman as "loud and defiant" (v.11a), with a roving desire (vv.11b – 12). "She lurks" (*teʾᵉrōb*, from *ʾārab*, "to lie in wait, ambush, with a hostile purpose"; GK 741) at every street corner, waiting for the gullible young man to pass her way. She has all the noise and activity of a street woman; her feet are all over town (Fox, 245). Plaut, 102, astutely warns,"Woe to the marriage whose partners cannot find values in their home and must constantly seek outside stimulation!"

NOTE

10 The translation “crafty” or “wily” (RV) for נִצָּרַת (*nṣurāt*) is uncertain. Toy, 149, lists the commentators’ suggestions: false, malicious, secret, subtle, excited, hypocritical. If the root נָצַר (*nāṣar*) is the same as that found in Isaiah 48:6, נִצְרוֹת (*nṣurôt*, “hidden, secret”), then a sense such as “wily” fits. The LXX (adding νέων [*neōn*, “young men”] for explanation) has “causes the hearts of the young men to fly away.”

c. The Seduction (7:13 – 20)

13 She took hold of him and kissed him
and with a brazen face she said:
14 “I have fellowship offerings at home;
today I fulfilled my vows.
15 So I came out to meet you;
I looked for you and have found you!
16 I have covered my bed
with colored linens from Egypt.
17 I have perfumed my bed
with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon.
18 Come, let’s drink deep of love till morning;
let’s enjoy ourselves with love!
19 My husband is not at home;
he has gone on a long journey.
20 He took his purse fi lled with money
and will not be home till full moon.”

COMMENTARY

13 – 15 The steps in the seduction are carefully calculated to ensnare the inexperienced youth. First, the woman boldly grabs him and kisses him (v.13).She follows this move with a second step — her flattering invitation (vv.14 – 15), in which she explains that she has “fellowship” offerings at home and came out especially looking for him. (Only a fool would believe the woman was interested in him.)

Here she presents herself as part of an orderly society by covering her evil

intentions with religious motivations (Waltke, 1:376). These fellowship offerings refer to the meat left over from the votive offerings made in the sanctuary (see Lev 7:11 – 21).Apparently the sacrificial worship meant as little to her spiritually as Christmas does to modern materialists who use the religious holiday as an excuse for secular pursuits. By expressing that she has fellowship offerings, she could be saying nothing more than that she has fresh meat for a meal or that she has become ceremonially clean, perhaps after her menstrual period. It is also possible that she is a participant in a fertility cult, and having made the appropriate offering she now needs a male partner. At any rate, her claim is probably a ruse for winning a customer;after all, nothing this woman says can be believed.

16 – 17 The third step is the report of her careful preparations. She is not poor, for she has a bed, and it has been made ready with fine, colored, imported linens from Egypt and perfumed with the best spices — aphrodisiac scents fit for a wedding bed (cf. Ps 45:8). Such lavish planning and preparation would overwhelm the gullible youth.

18 The fourth step is the direct proposition:“Come, let’s drink deep of love.” Her invitation speaks of complete satiety (*nirweh*, “let’s drink deep”) and sheer enjoyment (*nitᶜallᵉsâ*, “let’s enjoy ourselves”) in physical love (*dōdîm*, from *dôd*, found frequently in the Song of Songs for “loved one” or “beloved”).

19 – 20 The final step is the adulteress’s disarming reassurance. She does not try to convince the youth that their encounter is right, only that they can get away with it. She explains that “the man” (i.e., “my husband,” as the LXX has) is not at home. Conveniently, he is gone on a journey; and judging from his taking a moneybag and staying till the next full moon, they will be perfectly safe in their escapade. (He may even be gone for two weeks, if a comparison of vv.9 and 20 can give clues to the chronology.) At any rate, her appeal is bold, exciting, and apparently safe. It would take someone with the wisdom and integrity of a Joseph to resist such an appeal (cf. the important motifs in Ge 39, especially v.8).

d. The Capitulation (7:21 – 23)

21 With persuasive words she led him astray;
she seduced him with her smooth talk.

22 All at once he followed her
like an ox going to the slaughter,
like a deer stepping into a noose
23 till an arrow pierces his liver,
like a bird darting into a snare,
little knowing it will cost him his life.

COMMENTARY

21 – 23 The fall of the simpleton (see comment on *pᵉtā*ʾ*yim* in v.7), after a brief pondering, is sudden (*piṯōm*, "at once"; v.22) because she seduces him with her enticing speech. There is irony in the fact that *leqah*. (used earlier for wise instruction ["sound learning"; 4:2]) is now used for "enticement" (*liqh.â*; "persuasive words," NIV; v.21), which D. Winton Thomas ("Textual and Philological Notes," 280 – 92) interprets as the adulteress's method of speech.

Using the similes of an ox for the slaughter and a deer for the noose, the teacher warns of the complete ruin that can come to one who allows himself to be trapped by seduction (v.22). The sin could "cost him his life" (v.23; lit.,"that is his life," as in Nu 16:38) — a fact he needs to know. This verse may well refer to moral corruption rather than literal death.

The arrow piercing the liver may refer to the pangs of a guilty conscience that the guilty must suffer along with spiritual and physical ruin. But an arrow to the liver — symbolizing the seat of life in the OT — would certainly mean sure and sudden death. The point is that just as stupid animals see no connection between the trap and death, so morally stupid people do not make the connection between sin and death (Waltke, 1:384).

NOTE

22 The third clause in this verse is difficult. It has been translated traditionally as "fetters to the chastening of a fool." But there is no support that the word עֶקֶס (*ʿekes*) means "fetters." It appears in Isaiah 3:16 as "anklets."The parallelism here suggests that animal imagery is required.Thus the versions have "as a dog to bonds." Scott, 64, argues for the emendation of the MT's

וּכְעֻכָס אֶל־מוּסַר אָוִיל (*ûkᶜekes ʾel-mûsar ʾᶜwîl*) to כְּעֻכָס אֶל־מֹסֵר אַיָּל (*kᶜākkēs ʾel-mōsēr ʾayyāl*), yielding “like a stag prancing into captivity.”

3. Deadly Results of Consorting (7:24 – 27)

24 Now then, my sons, listen to me;
pay attention to what I say.
25 Do not let your heart turn to her ways
or stray into her paths.
26 Many are the victims she has brought down;
her slain are a mighty throng.
27 Her house is a highway to the grave,
leading down to the chambers of death.

COMMENTARY

24 – 27 With a final flurry of explanations, the teacher warns his son to stay away from the seductress’s paths (vv.24 – 25) because consorting with her leads to death (vv.26 – 27). The language is startling in its force; but the ruin that such evil brings is as devastating as death and may, of course, end in actual punishment. He stresses that she has been the death of many and that her house is the way that leads to the “chambers of death” (*ḥadrê-māwet*; v.27).

Her house is not the grave. It is, however, surely the way to it, and the one who takes that way is pathetic indeed. One’s life is not destroyed in a single instant; it is taken from people gradually as they chart a course of life that will leave them as victims of the wages of sin. But once again, the understanding is that God is the one who sentences sinners to death.

N. The Appeal of Wisdom (8:1 – 36)

OVERVIEW

In this chapter wisdom continues to be represented as a person (cf. ch. 7).The material combines 1:20 – 33, in which Wisdom proclaims her value, and 3:19 – 26, in which Wisdom is the agent of creation. The personification of wisdom has

affinities with other ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature and, in fact, may have drawn on various mythological ideas. (For a good survey on the subject, see Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985], 23 – 70.)

Wisdom in Proverbs 8, however, is not a deity like Egypt's *ma'at* or the Assyrian-Babylonian *Ishtar* .Rather, Wisdom is presented as though it were a self-conscious, divine being distinct from but subordinate to Yahweh; in fact, however, here it is a personification of the attribute of wisdom displayed by God. (See further Scott, 69 – 72; Ralph Marcus, "On Biblical Hypostasis of Wisdom," *HUCA* 23 [1950 – 51]: 157 – 71.)

Many interpreters have equated Wisdom in this chapter with Jesus Christ. The connection works only insofar as Jesus reveals the nature of God the Father, including his wisdom, just as Proverbs presents the personification of this attribute. Jesus' claims included having wisdom (Mt 12:42) and a unique knowledge of God (11:25 – 27). He even personified wisdom in a way that was similar to Proverbs (11:19; Lk 11:49). Paul saw the fulfillment of wisdom in Christ (Col 1:15 – 20; 2:3) and affirmed that Christ became our wisdom in the crucifixion (1Co 1:24, 30). So the bold personification of wisdom in Proverbs certainly provides a solid foundation for the revelation of divine wisdom in Christ.But because Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22 – 31 appears to be a creation of God, it is unlikely that Wisdom can be identified as the preincarnate Jesus Christ.

1. Introduction (8:1 – 3)

1 Does not wisdom call out?
Does not understanding raise her voice?
2 On the heights along the way,
where the paths meet, she takes her stand;
3 beside the gates leading into the city,
at the entrances, she cries aloud:

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 Plaut, 107, introduces this chapter by observing that it is now Wisdom's

turn to exhibit her attractions — in the open, not lurking in secret.Wisdom continuously attests to her value; the rhetorical questions of v.1 show that she is ready to call out. But this crying out is in the high roads and at the doors of the city, where people gather to buy and sell their goods, settle legal disputes, and determine proper decisions for the community — all requiring wisdom (v.2). Kidner, 76, comments, “A chapter which is to soar beyond time and space, opens at street level . . . relevant here as heaven.”

2. First Cycle (8:4 – 9)

a. Invitation: Listen and Gain Understanding (8:4 – 5)

4 “To you, O men, I call out;
I raise my voice to all mankind.
5 You who are simple, gain prudence;
you who are foolish, gain understanding.

COMMENTARY

4 – 5 The invitation from wisdom embraces all classes of people: v.4 includes “men” (*ʾîšîm*) and “humankind” (*bᶜnê ʾādām*, lit., “sons of mankind”);v.5 uses *pᶜtāʾyim* (“simple”) and *kᵉsîlîm*(“foolish”). The invitation for the “simple” and the “foolish”is to gain “prudence” (*ᶜormâ*) and “understanding” (*lēb*, , lit., “heart”).

b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Noble, Just, and True (8:6 – 9)

6 Listen, for I have worthy things to say;
I open my lips to speak what is right.
7 My mouth speaks what is true,
for my lips detest wickedness.
8 All the words of my mouth are just;
none of them is crooked or perverse.
9 To the discerning all of them are right;
they are faultless to those who have knowledge.

COMMENTARY

6 Wisdom begins her motivation by declaring that she has noble things to say. The term *nᵉgîdîm* is “noble, princely” (lit., “excellent things”). Moreover, when Wisdom opens her mouth, she speaks what is upright (*mêšārîm*). So what she has to say is excellent and right.

7 The things Wisdom says are also reliable (*ʾᵉmet*, “true”). The sense of truth here refers to what is firm and dependable; it is the reflection within the heart before the speech. This speaking of truth is derived from detesting wickedness. (Thus to Wisdom wickedness is taboo.)

8 The motivation now includes *ṣedeq* (with a *bᵉ* of essence, indicating Wisdom’s appeal is right and “just”). *S.edeq* is contrasted with *niptāl* (“crooked”) and < *ʿiqqēš* (“perverse”). There is no hidden agenda and no deception in Wisdom’s teachings.

9 Wisdom’s words are “right” (*nᵉkōḥîm*) and “faultless” (*yešar*m*îm).* The teachings are in plain view, intelligible to all who have some discernment or who find knowledge. (Here the theme of “to find” [*māṣāʾ*; “have,” NIV] is introduced.)

3. Second Cycle (8:10 – 21)

a. Invitation: Receive Instruction and Knowledge (8:10)

10 Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,

COMMENTARY

10 The second cycle begins with the invitation to receive (*qᵉḥû*, lit., “take”; “choose,” NIV) “instruction” (*mûsār*) and “knowledge” (*daʿat*) over silver and gold. True wealth derives from the former, not the latter.

b. Motivation: Wisdom Is Valuable (8:11 – 21)

11 for wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.

12 “I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion.
13 To fear the LORD is to hate evil;
I hate pride and arrogance,
evil behavior and perverse speech.
14 Counsel and sound judgment are mine;
I have understanding and power.
15 By me kings reign
and rulers make laws that are just;
16 by me princes govern,
and all nobles who rule on earth.
17 I love those who love me,
and those who seek me find me.
18 With me are riches and honor,
enduring wealth and prosperity.
19 My fruit is better than fine gold;
what I yield surpasses choice silver.
20 I walk in the way of righteousness,
along the paths of justice,
21 bestowing wealth on those who love me
and making their treasuries full.

COMMENTARY

11 The reason one should choose wisdom over wealth is because wisdom is more “precious” (ṭôbâ), more desirable than anything else. The goodness of wisdom is based on its incomparable value in life. Besides, wealth without wisdom will be used foolishly.

12 – 16 Wisdom’s lesson is now developed in two parts of ten verses each, the first pertaining to historic time (vv.12 – 21) and the second to primordial time (vv.22 – 31).The first emphasizes Wisdom’s counsel, understanding, and strength, and the second her nobility and authority (Waltke, 1:399 – 400).

The first part then establishes that the value of Wisdom may be found in its practical use, especially by those in power. Wisdom now claims to dwell with “prudence” (ʿormâ; v.12), that is, right knowledge in special cases. She also has (ʾemṣāʾ;“possess,” NIV) knowledge and discretion. Parallel to this quality is the fear of the Lord, which leads to rejection (śānēʾ;‘ “hate,” NIV; v.13) of evil, pride,

and perverse speech.

In vv.14 – 17, then, the pronouns are pronounced, though the English does not fully reflect this emphasis. Counsel, judgment, and understanding belong to Wisdom, and together they spell power (v.14). Power naturally forms the transition to the practical side of these qualities — people in power use Wisdom to govern the earth. (See Isa 11:1 – 4, which prophesies how the Messiah will use Wisdom in governing the world.) The point is made forcefully with the use of paronomasia: *mᵉlā- kîm yimlōkû*(“kings reign”; v.15) and *śārîm yāśōrû*(“princes govern”; v.16).Their government must be “just” (*ṣedeq*; v.15) if it derives from godly Wisdom.

17 – 21 Wisdom rewards those who love her.The emphasis here is that Wisdom not only possesses all these attributes but also makes them accessible to those who seek her. Loving (*ʾāhab*) and seeking (*šāḥar*) point up the means of finding (*māṣāʾ*) Wisdom (v.17). Those who find it obtain honor and wealth (vv.18, 21). This honor and wealth come along the way of righteous ness (v.20), for divine blessing is always connected to obedience, i.e., ethical behavior. Earlier the teacher had instructed the disciple to walk in the way of righteous ness; now we see that Wisdom walks in this way.

NOTES

16 Many of the MT MSS have נְדִיבִים כָּל־שֹׁפְטֵי אָרֶץ (*nᵉdîbîm kol-šōpᵉṭê ʾāreṣ*, "sovereigns, all the judges of [the] earth"); the LXX reads, τύραννοι … κρατοῦσι γῆς (*tyrannoi kratousi gēs*, "sovereigns . . .rule the earth"). Toy, 167, suggests that the Hebrew here has assimmilated to Psalm 148:11 in its construction.

21 The purpose of Wisdom's walking in righ teousness and justice is to bequeath property to those who love her, for only they have a proper claim on Wisdom's wealth. At the end of this verse, the LXX adds a transition: "If I declare to you the things of daily occurrence, I will remember to account the things of old."

4. Third Cycle (8:22 – 36)

a. Motivation: Wisdom Preceded and Delights in Creation (8:22 – 31)

22 "The LORD brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
23 I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began.
24 When there were no oceans, I was given birth,
when there were no springs abounding with water;
25 before the mountains were settled in place,
before the hills, I was given birth,
26 before he made the earth or its fields
or any of the dust of the world.
27 I was there when he set the heavens in place,
when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
28 when he established the clouds above
and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
29 when he gave the sea its boundary
so the waters would not overstep his command,
and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
30 Then I was the craftsman at his side.
I was filled with delight day after day,
rejoicing always in his presence,

31 rejoicing in his whole world
and delighting in mankind.

COMMENTARY

22 – 23 In this next part Wisdom focuses on her place in primordial time; here the motivation for receiving Wisdom precedes the invitation. The first two verses provide a summary: Yahweh possessed Wisdom before the creation of the world (v.23).With the verb *qānâ*(GK 7865) we must choose between homonyms and translate either “possess” or “create.” The older versions have “possess”; otherwise it might sound as though God lacked Wisdom and so created it before the world began. Their translators wanted to avoid saying that Wisdom was not eternal. Arius liked the idea of Christ as the meaning of Wisdom and chose “create” as the verb. Athanasius read “constituted me as the head of creation.”

The verb *qānâ*occurs twelve times in Proverbs with the idea of acquire; but the LXX and Syriac have the idea of “create.” Although the idea is that Wisdom existed before creation, the parallel ideas in these verses (*qānānî*, “brought me forth,” v.22; *nis-* *sakti*, “I was appointed,” v.23; and *ḥôlāltî*, “I was given birth,” v.24) argue for the idea of “create/establish”(see R. N. Whybray, “Proverbs 8:22 – 31 and Its Supposed Prototypes,” *VT* 15 [1965]: 504 – 14; W. A.Irwin, “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found,” *JBL* 80 [1961]: 133 – 42). The point of the metaphor of Wisdom’s being begotten is that this inspired Wisdom comes from God’s essential being unlike the rest of creation, which came into existence outside of him.And because this Wisdom existed before creation, it is not accessible to humanity and cannot be controlled by humans but must be revealed (Waltke, 1:409).

24 – 31 The summary statement is now developed in a lengthy treatment of Wisdom as the agent of creation. Verses 24 – 26 reiterate that Wisdom was established before creation (*t^ehōmôt*, “oceans” [v.24] or “deeps,” recalling creation); vv.27 – 29 declare that Wisdom was present when God created (notice the same progress of preexistence to world-creating acts for the Logos in Jn 1:1 – 3; Col 1:15 – 16); and vv.30 – 31 tell how Wisdom rejoiced in God’s creation (“delight day after day” [v.30] recalls that “God saw that it was good” [Ge 1:4, 9,12, etc.]).

Critical to the interpretation of this section is the meaning of , ʾāmôn (“craftsman”) in v.30. R. B. Y. Scott (“Wisdom in Creation:The , ʾāmôn of Proverbs 8:30,” *VT* 10 [1960]: 213 – 23) surveys the possible interpretations; he rejects “master craftsman,”“nursing child,” “foster father,” etc., and chooses rather the idea of “faithful” — a binding or living link. The image of “child” does fit the metaphor of birth. Although “workman/craftsman” has the most support and is chosen by most commentators (LXX; Vul.; Syr.; Targ.; SS 7:1[2]; Jer 52:15; see also Patrick W. Skehan, “Structures in Poems on Wisdom: Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24,” *CBQ* 41 [1979]: 365 – 70), it is not without problems in the meaning of the passage, the primary one being that the emphasis is on God the creator and not a separate agent. The translation “continually, faithfully” does harmonize with the contextual emphasis on wisdom’s faithful presence and daily delight.

b. Invitation: Listen to Wisdom and Be Blessed (8:32 – 36)

32 “Now then, my sons, listen to me;
blessed are those who keep my ways.
33 Listen to my instruction and be wise;
do not ignore it.
34 Blessed is the man who listens to me,
watching daily at my doors,
waiting at my doorway.
35 For whoever finds me finds life
and receives favor from the LORD.
36 But whoever fails to find me harms himself;
all who hate me love death.”

COMMENTARY

32 – 36 Verses 32 – 33 offer the explanation to the sons to listen, for a blessing is in store for all who live by Wisdom’s teachings.The explanation of this follows in vv.34 – 36. The alternatives could not be more striking — it is a choice between life and favor (vv.34 – 35) and harm and danger (v.36). The contrast is further marked out by the verb “finds me” (māṣāʾ; and “fails to find me” (ḥāṭāʾ, lit.,“misses me”; v.36).

O. Consequences of Accepting the Invitations of Wisdom or Folly (9:1 – 18)

OVERVIEW

With a two-strophe poem of two banquets, ch. 9 forms the conclusion of the lengthy nine-chapter introduction to the book of Proverbs. Now Wisdom is portrayed as a noble patroness and Folly as a wicked hostess. Both Wisdom and Folly will make their final appeals; and both appeal to the simpletons, those who need to live by wisdom but who are most easily influenced by folly. Wisdom out of love offers life with no mention of pleasure; Folly out of sensual lust offers pleasure with no mention of death.

1. Accepting Wisdom (9:1 – 12)

a. Invitation to Wisdom (9:1 – 6)

i. Preparations for the Invitation (9:1 – 3)

1 Wisdom has built her house;
she has hewn out its seven pillars.
2 She has prepared her meat and mixed her wine;
she has also set her table.
3 She has sent out her maids,
and she calls from the highest point of the city.

COMMENTARY

1 The first three verses provide an exposition that is essential for understanding the invitation to follow. The text now makes a transition from the previous passage; Wisdom was last seen as the director of work on the cosmic level (8:30 – 31), but now she is portrayed among humans. She has prepared a house and established it on seven pillars. This may refer to the habitable world (8:31), which is spacious and enduring. For the equation of a house with the world, see 8:29; Job 38:6; Psalm 104:5 (see Gustav Boström, *Proverbia Studien: Die Weisheit und des fremde Weib in Spr. 1 – 9* [Lund:Lunds Universitets

Arsskrift, n.F., Aud. I, Bd. 30, Nr.3: 1935], 1 – 14).

A number of feminist commentators take this passage and others in Proverbs as referring to a goddess named Wisdom who builds a palace, gives a feast, and inaugurates worship (see, e.g., Susan Cady, Marion Ronan, and Hal Taussig, eds., *Wisdom's Feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989]; B. Lang, *Wisdom and the Book of Proverbs: An Israelite Goddess Redefined* [Vandalia, MI: Pilgrim, 1986]; but see also Aida Besancon Spencer et al., *The Goddess Revival* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995]). There is no support for such a view, especially within the strict monotheism of Israel.

The image is of a grand house with a noble hostess. The seven "pillars" (*ʿammûdeyhā*, GK 6647) have been variously interpreted, often with fanciful suggestions (Boström, e.g., suggests the seven plan-ets). They seem to be part of the imagery of the house but may have cosmic references. The phrase has given rise to expressions such as "the seven pillars of wisdom" or "the house that wisdom builds." Since seven is a sacred or ominous concept, usually indicating completeness or expansiveness, the point seems to be that wisdom produces and is at home in a perfect world.

2 – 3 Wisdom has prepared a sumptuous banquet in the house and sends out her maids to call the simple to come and eat (M. Lichtenstein, "The Banquet Motif in Keret and in Proverbs 9," *JANESCU* 1 [1968/69]: 19 – 31).The figures of meat and wine represent the good teaching of Wisdom that will be palatable and profitable.

Wine in the Bible is at times used in a bad sense and at times a good sense; in the bad sense Proverbs is primarily concerned with drunkenness (cf. Isa 55:1 – 2; Jn 6:51, 55 for similar uses of the figures). It is uncertain whether the mixing of wine here refers to the practice of mixing wine with spices or mixing it with water, as the Greeks did (see the LXX of v.2, which introduces the Greek custom with the word *kratēr* ["bowl"]; cf. Pr 23:30; Isa 5:22). Thus, just as one would prepare a banquet and invite guests, Wisdom prepares to press her appeal — to come not for just a meal, but for life! All this imagery lets the simpleton know that what Wisdom has to offer is costly, but marvelous.

4 "Let all who are simple come in here!"
she says to those who lack judgment.

5 “Come, eat my food
and drink the wine I have mixed.
6 Leave your simple ways and you will live;
walk in the way of understanding.

COMMENTARY

4 – 6 The call goes out to the simple (*mî-petî*;“who are simple,” NIV), to those “who lack judgment” (*ḥ*ᵉ*sar-lēb*), to turn aside to Wisdom (v.4). A close analysis of the lines indicates two aspects of the appeal: she calls to the gullible to turn, and she calls to the brainless to come (Waltke, 1:427, n. 9).Carrying the figure of eating forward, the writer invites people to eat the food and drink the wine, i.e., to appropriate the teaching of wisdom (v.5).This acceptance would necessarily prompt the simpleton to abandon the “simple ways” (*p*ᵉ*tā*ʾ*yim*) and live (v.6).

The understanding of this last term is difficult.Some translations have interpreted the plural as simpletons — do not keep company with simpletons (meaning the peer group). Waltke, 2:427, has “leave your ways, you gullible ones.” The proper direction is on the way of understanding, but to follow that way requires repentance and turning away from folly.

b. Description of Responses (9:7 – 11)

OVERVIEW

The connection of these verses to the context is not immediately apparent, and so various commentators attempt different reconstructions. For example, Scott, 76, suggests that vv.10 – 12 continue the invitation and form the original end of vv.1 – 9. Others regard vv.7 – 12 entirely as a later insertion to provide a caution, but this view is not helpful. As the text stands, one can see the descriptions of the scoffer (vv.7 – 8a) and the wise man (vv.8b – 11) as examples of the two responses to the invitation of Wisdom.

i. The Scoffer (9:7 – 8a)

7 “Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult;
whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse.
8 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you;

COMMENTARY

7 – 8a We have met the scoffer before in the book (1:22; 3:34); he is the immoral or frivolous person who will not live by wise and moral teachings (13:1; 15:22; 21:24; 22:10). Moreover, he is not content to let others do so without his cynical mocking. The warning is that anyone who tries to correct a mocker is asking for trouble.“Strife” or “insult” (*qālôn*) and “abuse” (*mûm*) are second nature to this cynical heckler (v.7). The only response such rebuke will receive is hatred, so the warning is put in the form of a negative jus-sive: “Do not rebuke” (*ʿal-tôkaḥ*). The idea of hatred is a spontaneous rejection as well as a dislike for the one trying to correct the mocker. One may perceive the potential to learn in such a person, but if met with such scorn the effort should be abandoned.

ii. The Wise Man (9:8b – 11)

rebuke a wise man and he will love you.
9 Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still;
teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.
10 “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.
11 For through me your days will be many,
and years will be added to your life.

COMMENTARY

8b – 11 The antithetically parallel idea forms the contrast — the wise person will love the one trying to correct him (v.8b). “Love” (*ʾāhab*), conversely, has the idea of choosing and embracing; so this is the profitable response to corrective teaching.The parallelism of “wise” (*ḥākām*) and “righteous”(*ṣaddîq*) in v.9 underscores the interrelationship between these qualities and shows the predisposition of those who are teachable.

Moreover, the theme of the fear of the Lord (v.10) is brought forward here from 1:7 (perhaps forming an inclusion for chs. 1 – 9), because this is the foundation of all wisdom and all righteous ness (see B. Waltke, "Fear of the Lord," in *Alive to God: Studies in Spirituality Presented to James Houston* [ed. J. I. Packer and L. Wilkinson; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992], 17 – 33).The "fear of the LORD" forms the pious affirmation that the Lord is the Creator and Sustainer of life and the Giver of wisdom. The epithet "Holy One" is the plural *qᵉdōšîm*; although translated "holy men" by the Targum, the plural probably is meant to signify the majestic nature of the Lord — he is "All-holy" (Greenstone, 94). In the final analysis those who fear the Lord, add to their learning, and receive discipline will look forward to a long and productive life.

c. Consequence: Reward (9:12)

12 If you are wise, your wisdom will reward you;
if you are a mocker, you alone will suffer."

COMMENTARY

12 The conclusion of the matter is expressed by the antithetically parallel ideas: Wisdom rewards the wise, but mockery suffers alone. "Your wisdom will reward you" (*ḥākamtā lāk*) is literally "you are wise to yourself," meaning that wisdom brings its own reward; it is sufficiently satisfying to be worth pursuing.This does not mean that "you" are the sole beneficiary of wisdom, only a primary one. Conversely, "if you are a mocker, you alone must bear it ['you alone will suffer,' NIV]." These words anticipate the teachings of James (cf. Jas 3:1 – 12) that our ill-spoken words will haunt us throughout life.

2. Accepting the Invitation of Folly (9:13 – 18)

a. Invitation (9:13 – 17)

i. Situation of the Invitation (9:13 – 15)

13 The woman Folly is loud;
she is undisciplined and without knowledge.

14 She sits at the door of her house,

on a seat at the highest point of the city,
15 calling out to those who pass by,
who go straight on their way.

COMMENTARY

13 Now the rival “woman Folly” presses her appeal for the naive to come and eat from her provision.The translation “the woman Folly” for *ʾēšet kᵉsîlût* is better than “foolish woman” or “stupid woman”; she is the counterpart of the personification of wisdom.Her character is described as “loud . . . undisciplined and without knowledge.” “Loud” (*hōmîyâ*) comes close to the idea of riotous; McKane (366) defines her as restless and rootless. “Undisciplined” (*pᵉtayyût*) portrays her as foolish and simplistic. To these troubling qualities is added the idea of ignorance, which in Proverbs must be moral ignorance. (D. Winton Thomas, on the other hand, suggests the idea of *yādᵉʿâ* as meaning “become still, be at rest,” yielding here “restless” [“A Note on *balyadᵉʿ* in Prov. 10:13,”*JTS* 4 (1953): 23 – 25]).

14 – 15 Folly’s position (v.14) is prominent in the city streets. Here we must notice how she often imitates wisdom (cf. v.3), so only the cautious and discerning will make the right choice. In ch. 7 the adulteress woman was lurking in the night, but now Folly is openly bold and apparently accepted by the community. Her deportment is one of a prostitute; she has put no effort into preparing the feast but only sits and calls. Her invitation, likewise, is to passersby (v.15), here described as those “who go straight” (*hamyaššᵉrîm*) on their ways, thus identifying them as quiet and unwary.

NOTE

13 The text of v.13 is uncertain. The MT has, “The foolish woman is boisterous, simplicity, and knows not what.” The LXX reads, “A foolish and impudent woman comes to lack a morsel, she who knows not shame.” The Syriac has “a woman lacking in discretion, seductive.” The Targum translates it, “a foolish woman and a gadabout, ignorant, and she knows not good.” The Vulgate has, “a woman foolish and noisy, and full of wiles, and knowing nothing at all.” The point of the passage seems to be a description of this woman as

seductive and without knowledge of moral integrity (see Toy, 189).

ii. Invitation (9:16 – 17)

16 "Let all who are simple come in here!"
she says to those who lack judgment.
17 "Stolen water is sweet;
food eaten in secret is delicious!"

COMMENTARY

16 – 17 Folly's invitation parrots that of wisdom to *mî-petî* , "all who are simple" (see v.4). This competing voice, albeit louder and more appealing to those who "lack judgment," likewise invites people to eat."Stolen water" (*mayim-gᶜnûbîm*; v.17) is now offered to passersby instead of mixed wine from wisdom.The "water" is only sweeter than "wine" because it is stolen, much as food seems more delicious because it is unjustly gained — the idea of getting away with something is appealing to the baser instincts.

Of course, the figures here are similar to those in the section of Wisdom: the words and ways of Folly are compared to food and drink. Compare 5:15 – 16 (water) and 30:20 (bread) to see the specification as sexual folly. If the water is "stolen," it is taken from the legitimate spouse. So the invitation would be to the folly of sexual misconduct, with a hint that such would be common to alien religions and cultures that would destroy Israel's distinctiveness. If the invitation alludes to the surrounding fertility cults, then it is presented as a way to gain life, when in fact it will only bring death (see Perdue, 148).

b. Consequence: Death (9:18)

18 But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave.

COMMENTARY

18 The contrast with Wisdom's banquet continues, but now the consequence for Folly's "guests"is startling. The naive who enter her banquet hall do not

know that the dead are there. These “dead”are the *rᵉpā’îm*, often translated “shades.” It refers to the dead who lead a shadowy existence in *še’ôl*(see comment on 2:18 – 19; cf. Job 3:13 – 19; Ps 88:5; Isa 14:9 – 11). The verse approximates the “as-though”motif of wisdom literature — those ensnared by folly are as good as in hell, for that house is a throat to hell. Many “eat” on earth what they “digest” in hell. For a similar motif of death, see the sayings of Ptah-hotep (*ANET*, 412 – 14).

The point is that the life of folly — a life of undisciplined, immoral, riotous living — runs counter to God’s plan of life and inevitably leads to death. Once again a section of the book ends with the death of a fool (see 7:26 – 27, 36). Jesus will warn people to avoid this broad way that leads to destruction and to follow the straight and narrow path of righteous, wise living.

NOTE

18 The LXX adds to the end of v.18: “But turn away, linger not in the place, neither set your eye on her: for thus will you go through alien water; but abstain from alien water, drink not from an alien fountain, that you may live long, that years of life may be added to you.”

III. THE FIRST COLLECTION OF SOLOMONIC PROVERBS, PART I (10:1 – 15:29)

OVERVIEW

Beginning with ch. 10 we see a notable change in the form of Proverbs. No longer do we find the forceful admonitions to seek wisdom, the lengthy poems, or the developed pictures and personifications. Instead we find what more closely corresponds to the title “Proverbs” — a collection of independent, miscellaneous aphorisms, dealing mostly with the consequences of right or wrong actions on various topics. McKane, 415, classifies these topics generally

into old wisdom sayings that are concerned with the education of the individual, community-life topics that address harmful effects of antisocial behavior, and statements of religious piety that express moral-ism from the Yahwistic faith.

Each saying falls into one of a number of parallel patterns. Whybray, 57 – 59, lists and explains the most common of these: *antithetical parallelism*, pointing to a contrast between the wise and the foolish (“A wise son brings joy to his father / a foolish son is his mother’s bane”; cf. 10:1); *synonymous parallelism*, giving the statement greater comprehensiveness and authority (“Pride comes before disaster / and arrogance before a fall”; cf. 16:18); the *continuous sentence*, preserving the twofold shape of the saying but simply running the thought on to the second line (“A strong man who trusts in the fear of the LORD / will be a refuge for his sons”; cf. 14:26); *comparisons* , in which comparative value judgments are offered instead of black and white decisions (“If the righteous in the land get their deserts / how much more the wicked and the sinner!” cf. 11:31);and the *statement and explanation* (“A king’s threat is like a lion’s roar / one who ignores it is his own worst enemy”; cf. 20:2).

Please note that in the discussion of these various proverbs, since many of them are written in the singular, this commentary will often use the generic word “man” or the pronouns “he, his, him.” The intent here, however, is not to exclude the feminine gender.

NOTE

The proverbs in Proverbs 10:1 – 22:16 seem to defy an orderly arrangement or outline. With this fact in mind, yet still endeavoring to make this section as accessible and useable as possible to the reader, I have given a topical heading to each of the proverbs (in italics between the verse number and its explanation) and supplied a topical index (see the Introduction).

There have been a number of proposals regarding the arrangement of these proverbs according to the sounds of the Hebrew words and the sense of the proverbs. Even though there is always the chance that the repetition of sounds might be simply a coincidence or that the connections of sayings with similar meanings may have been due to other factors, there does seem to be enough

evidence to identify overarching themes in the sections.

We know that there are 375 proverbs in Proverbs 10:1 – 22:16 (375 being the numerical value of the Hebrew name “Solomon”) that form the second major section of the book; and this section may be divided into two parts as well. The first part (10:1 – 15:29) includes mostly antithetical parallels of the righ teous sage and the wicked fool. In the 185 proverbs of this section language seems to be the dominant theme (Perdue, 159). Proverbs 10:1a provides the title; then 10:1b – 16 focuses on wealth and speech; 10:17 – 11:31 deals with deeds and destinies; 12:1 – 28 is about speech and deeds; 13:1 – 25 is on good teaching, ethics, and learning; 14:1 – 32 focuses on living in wisdom; 14:33 – 15:4 emphasizes gentle speech; 15:5 – 19 stresses the importance of instruction; and 15:20 – 29 records the consequences of righteous ness and wickedness. (These categories represent the general section headings used by Waltke.)

Proverbs 15:30 – 33 marks the end of the section and the beginning of the next.The second part of this collection (16:1 – 22:16) has 190 sayings, with Yahweh-sayings and proverbs about the king and the court as the prominent themes (Perdue, 159).

A. Proverbs 10:1 – 32

1 The proverbs of Solomon:
A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish son grief to his mother.
2 Ill-gotten treasures are of no value,
but righteous ness delivers from death.
3 The LORD does not let the righteous go hungry
but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.
4 Lazy hands make a man poor,
but diligent hands bring wealth.
5 He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son,
but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son.
6 Blessings crown the head of the righteous, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.
7 The memory of the righteous will be a blessing,
but the name of the wicked will rot.
8 The wise in heart accept commands,
but a chattering fool comes to ruin.
9 The man of integrity walks securely,

but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.
10 He who winks maliciously causes grief,
and a chattering fool comes to ruin.
11 The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life,
but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked.
12 Hatred stirs up dissension,
but love covers over all wrongs.
13 Wisdom is found on the lips of the discerning,
but a rod is for the back of him who lacks judgment.
14 Wise men store up knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.
15 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city,
but poverty is the ruin of the poor.
16 The wages of the righteous bring them life,
but the income of the wicked brings them punishment.
17 He who heeds discipline shows the way to life,
but whoever ignores correction leads others astray.
18 He who conceals his hatred has lying lips,
and whoever spreads slander is a fool.
19 When words are many, sin is not absent,
but he who holds his tongue is wise.
20 The tongue of the righteous is choice silver,
but the heart of the wicked is of little value.
21 The lips of the righteous nourish many,
but fools die for lack of judgment.
22 The blessing of the LORD brings wealth,
and he adds no trouble to it.
23 A fool finds pleasure in evil conduct,
but a man of understanding delights in wisdom.
24 What the wicked dreads will overtake him;
what the righteous desire will be granted.
25 When the storm has swept by, the wicked are gone,
but the righ teous stand firm forever.
26 As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes,
so is a sluggard to those who send him.
27 The fear of the LORD adds length to life,
but the years of the wicked are cut short.
28 The prospect of the righteous is joy,
but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing.
29 The way of the LORD is a refuge for the righteous,
but it is the ruin of those who do evil.
30 The righteous will never be uprooted,
but the wicked will not remain in the land.

31 The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom,
but a perverse tongue will be cut out.
32 The lips of the righteous know what is fitting,
but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse.

COMMENTARY

1 *Wisdom, its affect on others.* This antithetical saying declares that the consequences of wisdom or folly in the child (“son” is idiomatic) affect the parents accordingly (cf. 17:21, 25; 23:24 – 25; 28:7;29:3; also “Ptah-hotep” in *ANET*, 413).

2 *Righteous ness, its value.* The sage asserts that “righteousness” (*ṣᵉdāqâ*) has far greater value than ill-gotten wealth. This word takes on the meaning of honesty in this contrast. Wealth in general can only be enjoyed for a while, but righteous ness delivers from mortal danger (*māwet*, “death”).

3 *Rewards, satisfaction of needs.* In another antithetical saying, the general observation is that the Lord rewards the righteous with the satisfaction of their needs. The text literally says that he will not leave unsatisfied “the appetite [*nepeš*, lit., ‘soul’] of the righteous,” which here includes the inner urge toward success. Conversely, “the wicked are condemned to live forever with their unfulfilled, and so sterile, desires, which cannot be transformed into practical attainment” (McKane, 426).

4 *Wealth, through diligence.* This saying attributes wealth to diligence. “Lazy hands” (*kap-rᵉmîyâ*, lit.,“slack hand”) refers to the careless work that such hands produce. See further Norman C. Habel,“Wisdom, Wealth, and Poverty Paradigms in the Book of Proverbs,” *Bible Bhashyam* 14 (1988): 28 – 49.

5 *Diligence, opposite of idleness.* Once again idleness, which leads to ruin, is contrasted with diligence. The wise son seizes the opportunities with keen insight into the importance of the season.

6 *Rewards, words of blessing.* The focus of this contrast is on rewards. We would expect a curse to be the antithesis of “blessings.” But the point is rather

that behind the speech of the wicked is aggressive "violence" (*ḥāmās*), so they cannot be trusted (McKane, 422).

7 *Reputation, good.* Likewise, a reputation is determined by righteous ness or wickedness. "Name"(*šēm*) and "memorial" (*zēker*) are often paired as synonyms. "Name" refers to fame; the name of the wicked will eventually disappear, and it will leave a bad memory that excites abhorrence (see also "Meri-ka-re," *ANET*, 415).

8 – 10 *Conduct, wise and foolish.* Next are three sayings contrasting the wise person with the fool.The first saying exhorts compliance with "commands" (*miṣwōt* possibly referring to scriptural commands) from superiors — a fool talks too much to be attentive to them. The second holds out the promise that security goes with those who have "integrity" (*tōm*), but the insecurity of retribution awaits the perverse. Verse 10 departs from the normal antithetical pattern to form a comparison: shifty signs, although grievous, are not as ruinous as foolish talk. (Note that v.10b is identical to verse 8b.) Both are to be avoided.

11 – 12 *Conduct, good and evil.* Two pairs of sayings (vv.11 – 12, 13 – 14) contrast good and evil and wisdom and folly (see R. B. Y. Scott, "Wise and Foolish, Righ teous and Wicked," *VT* 29 [1972]:146 – 65). What the righteous say is beneficial to life, unlike the aggressive violence of the fool (cf.v.8b). The idea of the "fountain of life" (v.11) may come from Psalm 36:9 (see also Pr 13:14; 14:27;16:22; Eze 47:1 – 12; Jn 7:38).

The second proverb (v.12) of the first pair compares the attitudes behind the two types: the wicked are motivated by hatred that brings dissension but the righteous by love that is harmonious. Love's covering wrongs is harmonious with forgiveness (see 1Pe 4:8).

13 – 14 *Speech, wise or foolish*. In the second pair of sayings, attention turns to wisdom and folly. In v.13 the critically perceptive person (*nābôn*; "discerning," NIV) speaks wisdom, unlike the fool, who constantly needs correction (cf. Ps 32:8 – 9).The other proverb extols the wisdom of silently storing knowledge rather than foolishly talking prematurely (see Jas 3:13 – 18; "Ptah-hotep" and "Amenemope" in *ANET*, 414 and 423).

15 *Wealth, security.* A contrast is provided here between rich and poor. Security comes with wealth.The image used is of a “fortified city” (ʿuzzô), which protects its inhabitants against all adversity.

16 *Rewards, life or ruin.* Rewards are determined by moral choices — righteousness brings life, but wickedness punishment (see Ro 6:23). The point seems to be that what one receives in life depends on a wise use of gifts and a righteous character.Kidner, 87 – 88, admonishes not to blame poverty for the quality of life.The point again is to live righteously (see also D. W. Thomas, “The Meaning of ḥaṭṭāʾt in Proverbs 10:16,” *JTS* 15 [1964]: 295 – 96).

17 *Discipline, its benefit.* Learning to “accept” discipline is wise because it will benefit others. The participle šômēr (“heeds,” NIV) means holding fast to discipline as a path of life. Abandoning (ʿōzēb;“ignores,” NIV) correction also influences others, unfortunately.

18 *Speech, lies and slander*. In this comparison two errors are given, the second being climactic: hypocrisy is bad enough, slander is worse. At least in the first one — the “lying lips” — one keeps hatred to himself. In the ancient world there is much in wisdom literature that condemns lying and slander (see “Amenemope” and “Ahiqar,” *ANET*, 423 and 429).

19 *Speech, controlled.* Controlling the tongue helps avoid sin. (See Jas 3:1 – 12 for a discussion of the loose tongue.)

20 *Speech, valuable.* What the righteous say is infinitely more valuable than what the wicked intend. The contrast is between the tongue (i.e.,what is said) and the mind (“heart,” i.e., what is determined). Righteous speech, like silver, is valuable and treasured.

21 *Speech, edifying*. Moreover, what the righteous say is edifying — it enhances (yirʿû; “nourishes,”NIV) common life. “Fools” (ʾewîlîm), characterized by a lack of discipline and little wit, ruin their lives and others as well.

22 *Wealth, a blessing.* God brings wealth to those whom he blesses — and without anxiety (ʿeṣeb;“trouble,” NIV). Psalm 127:1 – 3, too, stresses how the

Lord gives to his beloved prosperity and safety as well as peace of mind. The proverb is also a warning against self-sufficiency.

23 *Pleasure, good and evil.* One's character is revealed in what one enjoys. Evil conduct to the fool is "like sport" (*kiśḥôq*; "pleasure," NIV), literally, like a laugh; like child's play, it is so easy (Plaut, 132).This evil conduct is contrasted with wisdom, the delight of those who have understanding.

24 *Prospects for life, hopes and fears.* This little contrast declares the working out of the fear of the wicked and the desire of the righteous. The "terror of the wicked" (*mᵉgôrat rāšāᶜ*; "wicked dread," NIV) will come on them, so that there is no security for them; the "desire" (*taᵃᵘwâ*) of the righteous, which they long for in their righteous lifestyle, will be given to them.

25 *Confidence, in calamity.* Survival in catastrophes of life is reserved for the righ teous, for they are properly prepared to meet the real tests of life (Plaut, 132). Matthew 7:24 – 27 addresses the same point: If people base their lives on temporal values, they must know that they can be quickly swept away.

26 *Servants, lazy.* Vinegar to the teeth is an irritant that is unpleasant to experience, and smoke to the eyes is a hindrance to progress. This little proverb portrays the aggravation in sending a lazy servant on a mission — it could be a confusing, unpleasant ordeal.

27 *Fear of the Lord, life-giving.* The fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (1:7), contributes to a long and prosperous life. This saying is a general one. Why the righ teous suffer and even die young is a problem that perplexed Israel's sages (cf. Job; Pss 49; 73).

28 *Prospects for life, joy and ruin*. This proverb contrasts expectations, based on God's justice. The righteous will experience the joyful fulfillment of their hopes, but what the wicked hope for will be dashed.

29 *Security, the way of the Lord.* The "way of the LORD" refers to God's providential administration of life. Thus divine justice will be security for the righteous and disaster for the wicked.

30 *Security, of the righteous.* This proverb concerns the enjoyment of covenantal promises — dwelling in the land of Israel. It is promised to the righ teous (see Lev 26; Ps 92). If the people live in righ teous ness, they will enjoy the land; if not, they will be exiled.

31 *Speech, wise or perverse.* Righteous speech can be beneficial to others and pleasing to God; if it is perverse, it is a complete waste of words — no one wants to listen to the latter.The bold image of cutting out the tongue is hyperbolic.

32 *Speech, pleasing or perverse.* The righteous speak words that produce pleasure or delight (*rāṣôn;* "what is fitting," NIV). Proverbs teaches that good people use few words and choose them well. The wicked say things that are worthless or perverse, generally without prior consideration and beyond prudent limits.

NOTE

9 The verb translated "will be found out" (*yiwwādēaʿ*) is frequently emended to "will be harmed"(*yērôaʿ*) to make a better parallelism with "walks securely." It simply involves a change from a *dalet* to a *resh*, two letters that are easily confused.There is no reason to change the text, though, for the word "be known, found out" may be interpreted as a metonymy for the effect, "come to ruin."

B. Proverbs 11:1 – 31

1 The LORD abhors dishonest scales,
but accurate weights are his delight.
2 When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.
3 The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.
4 Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.
5 The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them,
but the wicked are brought down by their own wickedness.

6 The righteous ness of the upright delivers them,
but the unfaithful are trapped by evil desires.
7 When a wicked man dies, his hope perishes;
all he expected from his power comes to nothing.
8 The righteous man is rescued from trouble,
and it comes on the wicked instead.
9 With his mouth the godless destroys his neighbor,
but through knowledge the righ teous escape.
10 When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices;
when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy.
11 Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.
12 A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor,
but a man of understanding holds his tongue.
13 A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy man keeps a secret.
14 For lack of guidance a nation falls,
but many advisers make victory sure.
15 He who puts up security for another will surely suffer,
but whoever refuses to strike hands in pledge is safe.
16 A kindhearted woman gains respect,
but ruthless men gain only wealth.
17 A kind man benefits himself,
but a cruel man brings trouble on himself.
18 The wicked man earns deceptive wages,
but he who sows righ teousness reaps a sure reward.
19 The truly righteous man attains life,
but he who pursues evil goes to his death.
20 The LORD detests men of perverse heart
but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.
21 Be sure of this: The wicked will not go unpunished,
but those who are righteous will go free.
22 Like a gold ring in a pig’s snout
is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion.
23 The desire of the righteous ends only in good,
but the hope of the wicked only in wrath.
24 One man gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
25 A generous man will prosper;
he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.
26 People curse the man who hoards grain,
but blessing crowns him who is willing to sell.

27 He who seeks good finds goodwill,
but evil comes to him who searches for it.
28 Whoever trusts in his riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.
29 He who brings trouble on his family will inherit only wind,
and the fool will be servant to the wise.
30 The fruit of the righ teous is a tree of life,
and he who wins souls is wise.
31 If the righteous receive their due on earth,
how much more the ungodly and the sinner!

COMMENTARY

1 *Honesty, in business.* Honesty pleases the Lord.This contrast between what the Lord abhors and delights in elaborates the point. The Scriptures throughout condemn dishonesty in business (see Lev 19:35 – 36; Dt 25:13 – 16; Am 8:5; et al.). Likewise, the law codes of the ancient world ruled against it (see *ANET*, 388, 423). Whatever the Lord "abhors" must be avoided. Thus to be accepted by God in one's transactions, one must deal honestly (see Pr 16:11; 20:10, 23).

2 *Humility, wise and honorable.* Humility avoids disgrace and leads to wisdom (notice the sounds of the first colon: *bā'-zādôn wayyābō' qālôn,* "when pride comes, then comes disgrace"). "Pride" (*zādôn*; GK 2295) is literally a boiling up; and so hubris, an overstepping of the boundaries and insubordination, is meant. Humility describes those who know their place; but those who are proud, says Plaut, 136, are inflated to the level of self-bestowed divinity. The proud will have their egos deflated (*qal*m*ôn*, "made light of, disgrace").

3 *Integrity, a preservation.* Here is another proverb affirming the value of integrity. The contrast is between the upright and the unfaithful; those who use treachery (*selep bōgᵉdîm*, lit., "the crookedness of the unfaithful") are destroyed rather than guided by it.

4 *Righteous ness, better than wealth.* The focus of this saying is on what is most useful when disaster strikes: righteous ness or wealth. Whybray, 67, is correct in taking the "day of wrath" as divine punishment in this life (see Job 21:30; Eze 7:19;Zep 1:18). Righ teous ness, which pleases God, is therefore

more valuable than riches when anticipating divine justice.

5 – 6 *Conduct, righteous and wicked.* Here are two proverbs contrasting the righteous with the wicked.The first teaches that the righ teous enjoy security and serenity through life (*t'yaššēr darkô*; "makes a straight way," NIV; v.5). The second one states that the wicked are caught by their own evil desires;their sins catch up with them (v.6).

7 *Prospect for life, of the wicked.* The subject of the "hope" (*tiqwâ*) of the wicked is developed in this proverb, thus showing its consequences — his expectations perish with him (see Ps 49). Any hope for long life or success borne of wickedness will be disappointed. The LXX adds an antithesis: "When the righ teous dies, hope does not perish." The LXX's translators apparently wanted to see the fulfillment of the hope of the righteous as the world to come. But this proverb is not antithetical.

8 *Retribution, just.* Here is an expression of confidence in God's justice in bringing recompense into the world. The antithesis shows the consequences of actions with an unusual twist — the "trouble"(*sārâ*) that the righteous escape falls on the wicked.

9 *Speech, safety from slander* . This antithetical verse stresses that a righteous person can escape devastating slander through knowledge. The "godless"(*ḥānēp*, i.e., the hypocrite or flatterer) is the one who "destroys" a neighbor. The righteous will have sufficient knowledge and experience to identify and end the slander.

10 *Emotions, joy when righteous ness prevails.* The common theme of this line is joy; it comes from either the success of the righ teous or the ruin of the wicked (so an antithetical idea is present).Examples are found in 2 Kings 11:20 and Esther 8:15. Kidner, 91, notes: "However drab the world makes out virtue to be, it appreciates the boon of it in public life."

11 *Speech, helpful or harmful.* This contrast expressing the social effects of words is similar to that in v.10 (see also "Meri-ka-re," *ANET* , 415).The "blessing of the upright" (*birkaty'šārîm*) consists in the beneficent words and deeds that bring enrichment to a community. But the words of the wicked have a

disastrous effect on society, endangering, weakening, and ruining it with demoralizing, slanderous, and malicious criticism.

12 *Speech, silence rather than derision.* The next four proverbs (vv.12 – 15) follow the theme of talking. The first advises that it is proper to hold one's tongue rather than to deride a neighbor — in modern parental parlance, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." The wise man is a "man of discernment" (*ʾîš tᵉbûnôt;* "man of understanding," NIV); the other person lacks "judgment"(*lēb*). How one treats a neighbor is significant in Proverbs; you are expected to be a good neighbor.To despise (*bāz;* "derides," NIV) a neighbor is contemptible.

13 *Speech, keeping confidence.* Verse 13 contrasts the gossip and the "trustworthy man" (*neᵉman-rûaḥ;*lit., "trustworthy spirit"). The talebearer goes from one to another and speaks disparagingly about someone in a malicious manner; he cannot wait to share secrets that should be kept (see Lev 19:16; Jer 9:3). The talebearer is despised because he cannot be trusted.

14 *Speech, good advice.* Verse 14 is framed in a contrast as well, showing that advice is essential for the stability of a nation. The term *taḥbulôt* ("guidance")is comparable to steering a ship, here a ship of state (see Whybray, 67; Pr 1:5); without it the nation is in danger. Of course since "victory" (*tᵉšûʿâ*) is "sure," the saying assumes that the counselors are wise and intelligent.

15 *Speech, avoid pledges.* The fourth saying in this group instructs people to avoid pledges with strangers if they want to remain financially solid.The point of this proverb is to focus on the consequences of an action.The "stranger" (*zār;* "another," NIV) could refer to an individual from a different nation or merely to an unknown person; but here it may refer to someone from another clan or family (see Toy, 228).

16 *Kindness, brings respect.* Two contrasts are here juxtaposed: "a kindhearted woman" (*ʾēšet-ḥēn*) and "ruthless men," and "honor" (*kābôd;* "respect," NIV) and "wealth" (*ʿōšer*). The idea seems to be that one can seize wealth by any means, but "honor" is the natural reward for the gracious person. Two additional lines are found in the LXX (see Note), but they do not seem to provide the full sense.

17 *Kindness, better than cruelty.* This saying contrasts the consequences of dispositions: “kindness” (*ḥesed*) is healthy, but anger brings trouble. One’s health and well-being are at risk if the personality is volatile. We may say that such raging works against a person as a part of divine justice. The word “trouble” may recall Joshua 7:25 – 26, where Achan troubled Israel.

18 *Rewards, justly earned.* Ultimately, rewards are appropriate for different character traits. The line extols the benefits for one “who sows righ teous-ness,” i.e., one who inspires righteous ness in others while practicing it himself. What is sown will yield fruit (1Co 9:11; 2Co 9:6; Jas 3:18). According to Scott, 88, this verse teaches that one answer to the prosperity of the wicked is that it does not last.Notice the paronomasia in the line: “deceptive” is *šāqer* and “reward” is *śeker*.

19 *Conduct, brings life or death.* Since life and death result from moral choices, righteousness must be pursued. Some versions have “son of righteous ness,”an idiom meaning “having the quality of righteous-ness.” The MT has *kēn*, which *HALOT* identifies as a participle from *kûn* and interprets to mean “steadfast in righteous ness,” while Toy, 231 – 32, and McKane, 435, read it as *kān* and interpret it to mean “strive after, pursue.” “Life” and “death” describe the vicissitudes of this life but can also refer to what is beyond the grave.

20 *Conduct, pleasing to God.* This contrast records other things that the Lord either detests or delights in. The “perverse heart” is a twisted mind, i.e., the whole spiritual being is influenced toward evil.This inclination is an abomination to the Lord. Conversely, to please God one should follow a blameless course of life (see 2:21; 17:20).

21 *Retribution, its certainty.* God’s just retribution is certain. The initial expression, “Be sure of this”(lit., “hand to hand”), means that it is settled; one can depend on it (see M. Anbar, “Proverbs 11:21;16:15: *yd lyd* sur le champ,” *Bib* 53 [1972]: 537 – 38).Those who escape are called (lit.) the “seed of the righteous,” a phrase that describes a class of people — the righteous and their kind (cf. Isa 1:4;65:23;Whybray, 69).

22 *Character traits, beauty without discretion.* This proverb uses emblematic

parallelism to describe a beautiful woman without “discretion.” The word is literally “taste” (*ṭāʿam;* GK 3248); it can mean physical taste (Ex 16:31), intellectual discretion (1Sa 25:33 — Abigail had it), or ethical judgment (Ps 119:66). The description is of a woman with no moral sensibility or propriety; she is compared to a pig with an ornament. Why join a beautiful ornament and an unworthy body? The pig will not know its value, nor will a woman who has no discretion.

23 *Prospect for life, good or bad.* The consequences of hope are determined by moral character. God rewards the righ teous with prosperity; wrath eventually comes on the wicked.

24 – 25 *Prosperity, for generosity* . The paradox presented here does not refer to financial investments.Rather, in God’s economy generosity often determines prosperity: one must give in order to gain (see Ps 112:9; 2Co 9:6 – 9).

There are rewards for being generous. The person who is generous toward others will be provided for himself. The two lines in v.25 are in synonymous parallelism. The first description, “a generous man,” is literally “the soul of blessing” (*nepeš-bᵉrākâ*). “Blessing” in the Bible describes a “present” (Ge 33:11) or “special favor” (Jos 15:19). The verb “made rich” (*tᵉdušš̄an;* “prosper,” NIV) is literally “to be made fat,” drawing on the standard comparison between fatness and abundance or prosperity (Dt 32:15). The second line makes a comparison between providing water for the thirsty with generously providing for those in need (see Jer 31:25;cf. La 3:15). The kind act will be reciprocated.

26 *Business, socially responsible.* This proverb reveals how a merchant’s response to supply-and-demand will influence the customer’s opinion of him. Some merchants hoard up the produce to raise the prices when there is a great need for the produce. Merchants must have a social conscience, too.

27 *Prospect for life, realized desires*. One generally receives the consequences of the kind of life one pursues, whether good or evil. The line stresses that there is a divine justice. The expression “seeks [‘finds,’ NIV] good will” (*yᵉbaqqēš rāṣôn*) could refer to seeking God’s favor (see Ps 5:12; Isa 49:8); that is, whoever diligently seeks good is seeking divine favor.

28 *Security, object of faith.* Security and prosperity are determined by the object of faith. The righteous trust in the Lord and flourish. The image of the "green leaf " is a figure of prosperity and fertility throughout the ancient Near East. The image of falling uses the analogy of the physical act to portray coming to ruin in life.

29 *Laziness, trouble and poverty.* This proverb describes an avaricious man who deprives his family of livelihood and brings them to nothing but distress. He gains nothing for his efforts, "wind" signifying that which cannot be grasped (27:16; Ecc 1:14, 17). The second line suggests that one who foolishly mismanages his accounts may have to sell himself into slavery to the wise. So the ideas in the verse are complementary.

30 *Righ teousness, brings life.* Righteous ness brings life. Both "fruit" and "tree of life" are metaphorical, the first image signifying what the righteous produce and the second identifying that as a healthy, long life. The second half of the verse refers to "winning souls." If this reading is correct, it refers to capturing (*lōqēaḥ*, "to lay hold of, seize, conquer") people with ideas or influence (2Sa 15:6). This is the wise course of action. (See further Daniel C.Snell, "'Taking Souls' in Proverbs 11:30," *VT* 33 [1983]: 362 – 65; he interprets this expression as "comprehends souls.")

31 *Retribution, its certainty.* Retribution for sin is certain, for the righteous and especially for the sinner.The proverb uses a "how much more" argument — if that be true, how much more so this (argument from the lesser to the greater). The point is that divine justice deals with all sin; and if the righteous suffer for their sins, certainly the wicked will. The LXX introduces a new idea to the verse:"if the righteous be scarcely saved" — an idea recorded in 1 Peter 4:18 (see J. Barr, "בארץ—μόλις: Proverbs 11:31 and 1 Peter 4:18," *JSS* 20 [1975]: 149 – 64).

NOTES

7 “A wicked man” is the standard translation of ,ʾādām rāšāʿ. Waltke, 2:481, however, goes against most manuscripts and versions in favor of two manuscripts that omit rāšāʿ, thus leaving ,ʾādām and the translation “human being.” He bases this choice on internal evidence in the line.

16 The LXX inserts between the two lines, “She who hates virtue makes a throne for dishonor / the idle will be destitute of means.”The LXX apparently did not think that the contrasts in the lines were sufficient. The NEB, NAB, and NRSV follow this view and insert the readings. Toy, 229, thinks that the MT records remnants of the idea but that the LXX does not provide its full meaning.

19 The form כֵּן (kēn, “truly”) is in one MS, the LXX, and the Syriac as בֵּן (bēn, “son”), giving the reading “son of righteousness.” The use of the idiom, however, usually introduces evil qualities (“son of Belial, son of death”). The word kēn, meaning “steadfast, established,” here serves to modify the word following. The NIV and NRSV take it with reference to character, “the truly righteous man.” It may be best to take it as a confirming answer, “truly, it is right.”

30 The alternative reading is “he who takes away lives is violent”חָמָס (ḥāmās,“ “violent”) instead of חָכָם (ḥākām, is reflected in the LXX and Syriac. If לֹקֵחַ נְפָשׁוֹת (lōqēaḥ nᵉpāšôt)were intended positively (“winning souls”), “wise” could have easily been read through orthographic confusion. If the phrase were read negatively (“captures souls”), then “violent” fits well as the predicate. The line would then form an antithetical idea to the first line. The expression “taking lives away” is nowhere else used in a good sense; it is usually a negative expression for killing. But if in this context the activity of that expression is considered “wise,” then it has to have the sense of capturing lives with ideas, which is why it was earlier translated “winning souls.”

31 The MT has בָּאָרֶץ (bāʾāreṣ, “in the land”). The LXX’s “scarcely” could have come from a Vorlage of בַּצָּרָה (baṣṣārâ, “deficiency, want”) or בָּצוֹר (baṣṣōr,' “to cut off, shorten”), perhaps arising from confusion over letters. The verb יִשָּׁלֵם (yᵉšullām,“

“receive due”) means “be recompensed” and could be only indirectly interpreted “be saved.”

C. Proverbs 12:1 – 28

1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,
but he who hates correction is stupid.
2 A good man obtains favor from the LORD,
but the LORD condemns a crafty man.
3 A man cannot be established through wickedness,
but the righ teous cannot be uprooted.
4 A wife of noble character is her husband’s crown,
but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.
5 The plans of the righteous are just,
but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.
6 The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
but the speech of the upright rescues them.
7 Wicked men are overthrown and are no more,
but the house of the righteous stands firm.
8 A man is praised according to his wisdom,
but men with warped minds are despised.
9 Better to be a nobody and yet have a servant
than pretend to be somebody and have no food.
10 A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal,
but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.
11 He who works his land will have abundant food,
but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.
12 The wicked desire the plunder of evil men,
but the root of the righ teous fl ourishes.
13 An evil man is trapped by his sinful talk,
but a 2righ teous man escapes trouble.
14 From the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things
as surely as the work of his hands rewards him.
15 The way of a fool seems right to him,
but a wise man listens to advice.
16 A fool shows his annoyance at once,
but a prudent man overlooks an insult.
17 A truthful witness gives honest testimony,
but a false witness tells lies.
18 Reckless words pierce like a sword,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.
19 Truthful lips endure forever,

but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.

20 There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil,
but joy for those who promote peace.

21 No harm befalls the righteous,
but the wicked have their fi ll of trouble.

22 The LORD detests lying lips,
but he delights in men who are truthful.

23 A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself,
but the heart of fools blurts out folly.

24 Diligent hands will rule,
but laziness ends in slave labor.

25 An anxious heart weighs a man down,
but a kind word cheers him up.

26 A righteous man is cautious in friendship,
but the way of the wicked leads them astray.

27 The lazy man does not roast his game,
but the diligent man prizes his possessions.

28 In the way of righteousness there is life;
along that path is immortality.

COMMENTARY

1 *Discipline, its acceptance* . Those who wish to improve themselves must learn to accept correction and learn from it. This proverb adds the contrast that to refuse correction is brutish ("stupid"is *bā*ᶜ*ar,* descriptive of a dumb animal). It is almost as though one distinction between the human and the brute is this rational feature of being able to receive discipline.

2 *Conduct, pleasing to God.* Obtaining the Lord's favor is the result of virtue. Here the "good man" is contrasted with the "crafty man" *ʾîš mᶜzimmôt*. The term *mᶜzimmâ* is used of "plans" in a good sense in chs. 1 – 9 but in a bad sense in chs. 10 – 24.

3 *Righteousness, brings stability.* Only righ teous-ness brings stability in life — in society as well as in individuals. Society cannot long endure if established on evil principles (see 10:25).

4 *Character traits, noble wife.* The moral character of a woman affects her

husband's enjoyment of life. The contrast is between a wife of noble character (*ʾēšet-ḥayil,* as in 31:10) and a "disgraceful wife"(*mᵉbîšâ,* lit., "one who puts to shame," i.e., lowers her husband's standing in the community). A "crown"is a symbol of honor and renown; but the negative side, using the figure of "decay in his bones," is that the disgrace will eat away her husband's strength and destroy his happiness.

5 *Plans, just and unjust.* Righteous people are fair and honest. This verse shows that the thoughts (i.e., intentions) of good people are directed toward what is right, toward simple justice. The adverse describes the wicked, whose advice is deceitful and can lead only to evil.

6 *Speech, skillful defense.* The righteous are able to make a skillful defense against false accusations.The vivid picture of "lying in wait for blood" conveys that the wicked make a trap by their false accusations (Whybray, 73). The righteous, who through discipline and instruction have gained knowledge and perception, are able to avoid this danger.

7 *Security, of the righteous.* Here is another saying on the stability of the righteous in times of trouble (cf. Mt 7:24 – 27). The image of the fate of the wicked as being "overthrown" (*hāpôk*) is forceful and may allude to Genesis 19:21 — they will be destroyed completely.

8 *Wisdom, its appreciation.* This saying makes a point about the appreciation of clear thinking.Praise for a person is in proportion to or "according to" (*lᵉpî,* from *peh* ; lit., "mouth") one's wisdom.The term for "wisdom" (*śekel,* lit., "intelligent," as in 1Sa 25:3) refers to the capacity to think straight.The "warped mind" is *naʿᵃwēh-lēb-* — i.e., a crooked heart that lacks the ability to see things as they really are and so makes wrong choices. No praise exists here.

9 *Humility, better than pretension.* One should be satisfied with comfort at the expense of pretension. The point seems to be that some people live beyond their means in a vain show (*mitkabbēd,* "pretend to be somebody," a Hithpael participle from *kābēd,* "to be weighty, honored"), whereas if they lived modestly they could have some of the conveniences of life, e.g., a servant. Another way to read v.9a is, "Better is the lowly that serves himself "(see Note).

10 *Character traits, compassion for animals.* Compassion for animals indicates one's character. The righteous are kind to all God's creation (see Dt 25:4) because they have received his bounty. Toy, 248, suggests the analogy that if one is kind to animals, one will surely be kind to humans. Green-stone, 129, adds that even when the wicked are moved to compassion, they often manifest it in a cruel way.

11 *Diligence, prospers.* One ensures income through diligent work and not through unfounded speculation. *Rêqîm* means "vain things" or "empty things"; here it refers to "fantasies" (so NIV). Plaut, 145, advises that on the basis of this truth people should do their work and not run after some dream of a quick profit.

12 *Prosperity, for righteous pursuits.* The proverb is difficult to interpret, as the many variant readings for it show. The text of v.12a says, "the wicked desire the net of evil men." Toy, 249 – 50, surveys all the readings and proposals (see Note); and while he finds the LXX's reading clear, he prefers the emendation, "wickedness is the net of bad men." The verse seems to be saying that there are good rewards for the righteous, but the wicked are dangerous and perhaps get caught in their own devices.

13 *Speech, dangerous*. Righteous people avoid evil talk because it is dangerous. The point of the parallel expression is that the evil man catches himself in his words (lit., "the rebellion / transgression of his lips"). People who are righteous will not get themselves into a bind (*s.armâ*; "trouble," NIV) by what they say.

14 *Prosperity, through words and work.* Proper speech and diligent work result in good things. If one's conversation is wise, intelligent, and honoring to God, it will result in blessing, i.e., good things will come of it.

15 *Wisdom, takes advice.* People demonstrate their maturity by how well they respond to sound advice. Reasonable people (i.e., "wise") will recognize and accept good advice, even if they themselves often give advice to others. "Advice" (*ʿēṣâ*) is an application of wisdom and knowledge to a specific situation, either by astute observation or well-thought-out opinion.The fool, however, is set in his own ways and will not listen to advice. "The way of a fool" (*derek* *ʾĕwîl*) describes the headlong course of actions not abandoned even when good advice

is offered.

16 *Wisdom, overlooks insults.* Those who are mature are able to handle criticism without responding instinctively and irrationally. McKane, 442, says that the fool's reaction is "like an injured animal and so his opponent knows that he has been wounded."The wise man does not give the enemy that satisfaction. It is not so much that the wise man represses anger and feelings but that he is more shrewd in dealing with them.

17 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* The true witness (ʾᵉmûnâ; "truthful witness," NIV) is reliable because he tells the truth; he always utters what is right. The contrast is made with the false witness and his lies.

18 *Speech, wounding and healing.* Those who are wise do not cause harm by their reckless talk."Reckless words" (bôṭeh) has the idea of speaking hastily and unadvisably (see Lev 5:4; Nu 30:7).Such talk is like a piercing sword — it wounds.Conversely, the tongue of the wise (a metonymy for what the wise say) is "healing" (marpē, which is a metonymy of the effect, showing the opposite of the cutting, irresponsible words). The words are healing because they are faithful and true, gentle and kind, uplifting and encouraging.

19 *Speech, truth outlasts lies.* Truthfulness will outlive lies — forever. Or, conversely, as Plaut, 147, says, "Lies have generally limited staying power." The LXX saw the setting for this proverb in the courts of law: "True lips establish testimony, but a hasty witness has an unjust tongue." The little expression "only a moment" is literally "till I wink again"(ʾangᵉdâ, a denominative verb from regaʿ); it forms a circumlocution for the idea.

20 *Plans, for evil or peace.* The contrast here is between plotting evil and promoting peace with a view to the consequences. The effect of plotting evil can only be sorrow and trouble, because "evil" (rāʿ, GK 8273) has the idea of pain in it. "Peace" (šālôm, GK 8934), by contrast, refers to social wholeness and well-being (see Pss 34:14; 37:37). The "counselors of peace," as the text literally reads, will reap the inner contentment from doing what is right as well as the pleasure of seeing positive results.

21 *Security, of the righteous.* Here is a relative truth about the contrast

between the righteous and the wicked with respect to calamity. “No harm befalls the righteous” means that decent people do not have frequent trouble of their own making, although Rashi took it to mean that the righteous do no evil even unintentionally (Greenstone, 134). ,ʾĀwenis “evil, harm, misfortune” and is probably not sin in this instance (see also Ge 50:20; Ro 8:28, 35 – 39).

22 *Speech, truth pleases God.* Truthfulness rather than falsehood pleases the Lord. The contrast in consequences is strong: “pleasure, delight” (rāṣôn) versus “abomination” (tôʿēbâ; “detests,” NIV). To speak falsehood is a misuse of a God-given faculty.The point the verse teaches is to act in good faith;in the OT ʿāśâ + ʾemûnâcarries this meaning (i.e., “the ones doing truth”; “men who are truthful,” NIV).

23 *Speech, discretion.* Wisdom is distinguishable from folly in speech. The “prudent” (ʾādām ʿārûm, lit., “a shrewd man”) restrain themselves from displaying knowledge. The verb “conceals”(kōseh; “keeps,” NIV) does not mean that he never speaks; rather, it means that he uses discretion.Conversely, the intent of “fools” (kᵉsîlîm) is to call out “folly” (ʾiwwelet). McKane, 422, notes that the more a fool speaks, the less likely he is able to speak effectively.

24 *Diligence, rules.* Diligence at work determines success and advancement. To put it bluntly, the diligent rise to the top and the lazy sink to the bottom. At the bottom they may be forced to work as though they owed it. For other proverbs extolling the virtue of industry, see 6:6 – 11; 10:4; 12:27; 13:4;19:15; 21:5.

25 *Speech, encouraging.* Words of encouragement lift the spirits of someone who is depressed through anxious fear. “Anxious” (dᵉʾāgâ) denotes “anxiety, fear” (see Jer 49:23; Eze 4:16; for the verb dāʾag, see Ps 38:18[19]; Jer 17:8 [“worries,” NIV]). Anxiety in the heart bows the person down — bowing in the sense of physical mourning (Pss 35:14; 38:6). The “kind word” (dābār ṭôb) includes encouragement, kindness, and insight — saying what the discouraged person needs in order to gain a proper perspective and renew hope and confidence. There is an effective wordplay in the verse:“weighs down” (*yašh.ennâ*) and “cheers up” (yašḥennâ) One should seek to turn another person’s depression into rejoicing by saying the right things.

26 *Associations, dangerous.* The righteous cautiously avoid dangerous friendships. There is a great variety of ways this verse has been translated and interpreted. The verb *yātēr*(“is cautious”) can be taken to mean “spy out, examine,” which makes a fine contrast to the “leading astray” (from *nāʿâ*) of the “way of the wicked.” Emerton takes *ytr* from *ntr* in the Hiphil, “to set free”; *yuttar* in the Hophal would yield the meaning “the righteous is delivered from harm [reading *mēnāʿâ*]”” (J. A. Emerton, “A Note in Proverbs 12:26,” *ZAW* 76 [1964]:191 – 93). Another possibility is to interpret the line thus: “The righteous guides his friend aright.” The proverb, at least, is advising correct action in friendships.

27 *Diligence, successful.* Diligence leads to success. The negative image in this antithetical line is of the lazy person who cannot bring a project to completion. The verb *yaḥᵃrōk* is rare; in Aramaic it means “to roast” (i.e., “to scorch or singe by burning”). Its use here is metaphorical: just as one who might hunt but never cook what he finds, so the lazy person never completes a project. The *Midrash* (*Gen. Rab.* 67:2) sees here an allusion to the Jacob and Esau story in Genesis 25. (But see Mitchell Dahood, “The Hapax *harak* in Proverbs 12:27,” *Bib* 63 [1982]: 60 – 62; he translates, “The languid man will roast no game for himself, but the diligent will come upon the wealth of the steppe.”)

28 *Righteous ness, leads to immortality.* A righteous lifestyle leads to immortality. The verse probably means that those who enter righteous ness by faith and seek to live righteously are on the way to eternal life. “No death” (*ʾal-māwet*) may be taken to mean “immortality” (so NIV); but it can also mean permanence and stability in this life (see M.Dahood, “Immortality in Proverbs 12:28,” *Bib* 41 [1960]: 176 – 81).

Some manuscripts and ancient versions take the second colon of this verse as, “there is a path that leads to death.” McKane, 451 – 52, opts for this reading and notes that the MT was probably prejudiced toward the doctrine of immortality. In Proverbs and in the early OT, the teachings on immortality are not clear; specifically, unless this is an exception, *ḥayyîm*(“there is life,” NIV) is not used in Proverbs of eternal life. So many prefer the antithetical parallelism to the synonymous.

NOTES

9 The LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate, as well as many modern versions, repoint the noun (“a servant”) as a participle for the reading “who serves [himself].” But the MT is reliable and does not need to be changed.

12 The MT in the first colon reads, “The wicked desires the net of evil men”; the LXX has “the desires of the wicked are evil”; the Syriac has “the wicked desire to do evil”; and the Latin has “the desire of the wicked is a defense of the worst [things or persons]” (see Toy, 249 – 50). The word *mᵉṣôd* in the MT is a “net” or “snare” (with the meaning by metonymy of “plunder”), or a “stronghold.” It could be a corruption for *mᵉṣôr* a “fortification” (Waltke, 2:529). Whatever the word was, the LXX and the Syriac did not translate it.The point is that the wicked do not have their own strong defense and so covet a defense against other wicked plans.

D. Proverbs 13:1 – 25

1 A wise son heeds his father’s instruction,
but a mocker does not listen to rebuke.

2 From the fruit of his lips a man enjoys good things,
but the unfaithful have a craving for violence.

3 He who guards his lips guards his life,
but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.

4 The sluggard craves and gets nothing,
but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfi ed.

5 The righteous hate what is false,
but the wicked bring shame and disgrace.

6 Righteousness guards the man of integrity,
but wickedness overthrows the sinner.

7 One man pretends to be rich, yet has nothing;
another pretends to be poor, yet has great wealth.

8 A man’s riches may ransom his life,
but a poor man hears no threat.

9 The light of the righteous shines brightly,
but the lamp of the wicked is snuffed out.

10 Pride only breeds quarrels,
but wisdom is found in those who take advice.

11 Dishonest money dwindles away,
but he who gathers money little by little makes it grow.
12 Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.
13 He who scorns instruction will pay for it,
but he who respects a command is rewarded.
14 The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life,
turning a man from the snares of death.
15 Good understanding wins favor,
but the way of the unfaithful is hard.
16 Every prudent man acts out of knowledge,
but a fool exposes his folly.
17 A wicked messenger falls into trouble,
but a trustworthy envoy brings healing.
18 He who ignores discipline comes to poverty and shame,
but whoever heeds correction is honored.
19 A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul,
but fools detest turning from evil.
20 He who walks with the wise grows wise,
but a companion of fools suffers harm.
21 Misfortune pursues the sinner,
but prosperity is the reward of the righteous.
22 A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children,
but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous.
23 A poor man's field may produce abundant food,
but injustice sweeps it away.
24 He who spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.
25 The righteous eat to their hearts' content,
but the stomach of the wicked goes hungry.

COMMENTARY

1 *Discipline, its acceptance*. Those who are wise listen to instruction and respond properly to discipline. Driver ("Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs," 174) suggests the reading *nē'yussār*, "allows himself to be disciplined."The point of this antithetical saying is teachability. The "scorner" (*lēṣ*; "mocker," NIV; GK 4370) is the highest level of a fool. He has no respect for authority, reviles religion, and because he thinks that he knows what is best, is not teachable (Whybray, 77). The use of *gᵉʿārâ* ("rebuke") shows that the mocker

does not respond to any level of discipline.

2 *Speech, helpful or harmful.* Words and wishes find their just rewards. This saying concerns the outcome of conduct; as Alden, 104 – 5, says, a common theme in Proverbs is that you get what you deserve.The clauses in this verse do not fit very well; the LXX, therefore, has for the second line “the souls of the wicked perish untimely.” More likely the second line is saying that the desire of the “unfaithful”(*bōgᵉdîm,* or “treacherous”) is to obtain what does not belong to them.The “violence” that is their appetite refers to the violence that is done to others.

3 *Speech, wisdom of discretion.* It is safest to hold one’s tongue. The lesson is that tight control over what one says prevents trouble. Here is a perfect antithesis on the subject of speech (for similar ideas see 10:10; 17:28; Jas 3:1 – 12; Sir 28:25; see also “Amenemope,” ch. 3; 5:15, who advises to “sleep a night before speaking”). The old Arab proverb is appropriate: “Take heed that your tongue does not cut your throat” (O. Zockler, *Proverbs,* in *Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures,* ed. Charles Aiken [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.], 134).

4 *Diligence, better than daydreaming*. The fulfillment of dreams demands diligence. The contrast is between the “soul of the slothful” (*napšô ᶜāṣēl;*“the sluggard,” NIV) and the “soul of the diligent”(*nepeš ḥārūṣîm;* “the desires of the diligent,” NIV).Rather than spend all day hoping for things they do not have, the diligent work toward realizing their dreams. McKane, 458, writes, “Laziness is barren and encourages escapism; the illusory world of desire unrelated to attainment is a prison.”

5 *Conduct, hating falsehood or acting shamefully.* Here is another contrast between the moral conduct of the righteous and the wicked: the righteous hate what is “false” (*šeqer*), but the wicked act vilely and shamefully. The verbs *yabᵓîš* (“shame”)and *yaḥpîr*(“disgrace”) can be taken as a hendi-adys: “spread the smell of scandal” (McKane, 460).For *bāᵓaš*with the nuance of “stink,” see Exodus 5:21 and Ecclesiastes 10:1 (see Note). Plaut, 152, comments: “Unhappily, the bad odor adheres not only to the liar but also to the one about whom he lies — especially when the lie is a big one.”

6 *Righ teousness, brings security.* Security in life resides with righteous

ness.This little contrast shows that righteous ness, like a fortress, protects the man of integrity (see 2:11; 4:6).This may work through divine intervention or natural causes. “Righ teous-ness” (ṣ·dāqâ) refers to that which conforms to God’s law and to order; so it would be natural to expect that the perfect walk (tām-dārek, lit., “the way of integrity”; “the man of integrity,” NIV) would be safe. By contrast, perverse and malicious activity (riš·ʿâ,' “wickedness”) plunges one into sinful activity.

7 *Honesty, better than pretension.* People may not be what they seem to be. Some who are poor pretend to be rich, perhaps to save face; some who are rich pretend to be poor, perhaps to conceal wealth and avoid responsibilities. Although there are times when such pretending may not be wrong, the proverb suggests that people should be honest and unpretentious. An empty display or a concealing of means can come to no good. “Pretending to be rich” is like “pretending to be somebody” (cf. 12:9).

8 *Wealth, its disadvantages.* There are disadvantages to having possessions. On the surface the verse appears to be saying that only the rich are susceptible to kidnapping and robbery. The second line, however, says that the poor person does not heed rebuke — he does not have money to buy off oppressors (see McKane, 458). The rich person is exposed to legal and powerful assaults and uses his wealth as ransom. The poor person is free from blackmail and so ignores the attack and endures the consequences of difficulties.

9 *Prospect for life, endurance of the righteous.* The righteous can anticipate a long and prosperous life.The images of light and dark are used effectively; “light” represents life, joy, and prosperity, while “dark” signifies adversity and death. The verb yiśmāḥ carries the meaning “shines” rather than “rejoices” (KJV, NASB; see Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 180, who shows the relationship between “bright” and “joy” in Ugaritic). The figure of light may well be drawn from the enduring flame of the temple light.

10 *Wisdom, takes advice.* Those who are wise listen to advice rather than argue out of stubborn pride. The idea of “pride” (zādôn) here describes contempt for other opinions, a clash of competing and unyielding personalities (Kidner, 102). This kind of conceited person creates strife, enflames passions, and wounds feelings (McKane, 454). Only strife can come from him. But the wise

are “those who take advice” (*nôʿāṣîm*).

11 *Prosperity, honest investment.* Steady and wise investment produces prosperity. This is a warning against wild speculation. The image of “hand by hand” (“little by little,” NIV) stresses the diligent activity and the gradual growth of one’s investment. But if the riches come quickly through some unfounded means, one could lose them just as easily. There is some question whether the text should read “in haste” (quick scheme) or “in vanity”(meaning either “dishonest” [so NIV] or transitory;see Note). The MT reads the latter; it could simply mean that the gain comes from something transitory or nonexistent, which may imply dishonesty.

12 *Prospect for life, discouraging and encouraging.* It is invigorating to realize one’s hopes; to fail to do so can be discouraging or depressing (*maḥᵃlâlēb*, “makes the heart sick”). This is a general saying applicable to believers and unbelievers alike. Plaut, 153, elaborates that people can bear frustration only so long; they must have encouragement to continue. Perhaps believers should make it part of their task to help others realize their hopes whenever possible.

13 *Instruction, reward for heeding.* Safety lies in obedience to proper “instruction.” The word *dābār*(lit., “word, thing”) signifies teaching in general, and the word *mis.wâ* the more forceful instruction, viz.,“a command.” The use of these two terms carries religious significance, since they most often refer to Scripture. Kidner, 103, says that their use is a “reminder that revealed religion is presupposed in Proverbs.” The vivid point made in *yēḥābel*(“will pay”; *BHS* suggests *yʿḥubbāl*,' “will be broken by”) is that whoever despises the teaching will be treated as a debtor; he will pay for it if he offends against the law.

14 *Instruction, benefits for life.* The teaching of wisdom is life giving. The second line is the consequence of the first: not only does wisdom give life, it also turns one from the snares of death. “Snares of death” suggests that death is like a hunter; McKane, 455, compares the idea to the Ugaritic god of death, Mot, in his carrying people off to the realm of the departed.The image of the “fountain of life” is used of “the mouth of the righteous” in 10:11 and “the fear of the LORD” in 14:27.

15 *Discernment, brings favor.* Wisdom and intelligence add to one’s social

esteem. *Śēkel-ṭôb* (“good understanding”) describes the capacity for good sense, sound judgment, and wise opinions. The second line is a bit problematic; it says that the way of treachery passes away. Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 181) supports the idea with the reading “is not lasting” (see Note).

16 *Knowledge, basis of prudent acts.* Actions either display wisdom or expose folly. The wise will study the facts and then make decisions. The “prudent”here is *ʿārûm*— one who knows the circumstances, dangers, and pitfalls. Such knowledge makes him cautious. Not so the fool! He will eventually make a fool of himself because it is his nature. McKane, 456, sees in *yiprōś* (“exposes”) the figure of a peddler displaying his wares: “he spreads out folly.”

17 *Servants, wicked or faithful.* The faithfulness of the messenger determines the success of the mission. Wisdom literature in the ancient world was frequently concerned with instructing ambassadors. Here the faithful envoy (*ṣîr ʾᵉmûnâ*; “trustworthy envoy” [NIV], an expression suggesting governmental ser vice — see Isa 18:2; Jer 49:14) ensures success (*marpē*ʾ, lit., “brings healing”). The “wicked messenger” falls into trouble, perhaps as a punishment. The RSV reads a causative *yappîl*, yielding “plunges men into trouble,” perhaps by betraying trusts.

18 *Discipline, its benefit.* Responding correctly to discipline can bring honor and success; this stands in contrast with poverty and shame. The key is “discipline” (*mûsār*) and “correction” (*tôkaḥat*). The point seems to refer to commercial success; control and caution bring results.The verse has a powerful little wordplay: “shame” is *qālôn* (lit., “lightness”) and “honor” is *yᵉkubbād* (lit., “made heavy”). McKane, 456, observes that the difference is between the man of weight (power and wealth) and the man of straw (lowly esteemed and impoverished).

19 *Prospect for life, fulfilled.* The lines here are difficult. Toy, 274, suggests that each line has lost its parallel line. Perowne, 103, may offer the best summary for the difficult verse: “In spite of the sweetness of good desires accomplished, fools will not forsake evil to attain it” (cf. 13:12; 29:27). One can surely say that Proverbs teaches people to make their desires good so that fulfilling them is cause for joy.

20 *Associations, with wise or fools.* Proper company contributes to safety and growth. This verse advises association with the wise and not with fools. The wordplay in the second line stresses the power of association: “a companion [*rō*ʿ*eh*] of fools suffers harm [*yer*m*ôa*<].” Several scholars have attempted to parallel the wordplay. A. Guillaume has, “he who associates with fools will be left a fool” (“A Note on the Roots רוע, ירע, and רעע in Hebrew,” *JTS* 15 [1964]: 294). Kidner, 104, cites Knox’s translation of the Vulgate: “Fool he ends that fool befriends”(for further teachings on associations, see 1:10;2:12; 4:14; 16:29; 23:20; et al.). The point cannot be missed: Examine who is influencing you.

21 *Prosperity, reward of righteous.* Here is teaching on recompense in absolute terms. It is this idea that Job’s friends applied (incorrectly) to his situation. “Good” (*ṭôb*) is the general idea of “good fortune” or “prosperity” (so NIV); “evil” (*rāʿâ*) is likewise “misfortune” (so NIV) or “calamity.”

22 *Restitution, by divine intervention.* Divine justice determines the final disposition of one’s inheritance. In Israel the idea of bequeathing an inheritance was a sign of God’s blessing; blessings extended to the righteous and not to the sinners (see Ps 49:10, 17 for the idea of the wicked’s leaving their estates for others).

23 *Poor, susceptible to injustice.* Injustice can take away what hard labor produces. Plaut, 155, makes this application: There is no need for poverty; the earth yields enough if justice and decency prevail. The verse may also be saying that anything produced through unjust means will not endure. The lesson concerns the proper way to deal with produce, not the amount of one’s resources.

24 *Discipline, evidence of love.* Parental love is displayed in disciplining children responsibly. The powerful verbs “hates” and “loves” stress the point — hating a son probably means, in effect, abandoning or rejecting him. Whybray, 80, cites an Egyptian text that says that “boys have their ears on their backsides; they listen when they are beaten” (for general biblical teaching on this issue, see Eph 6:4; Heb 12:5 – 11; see Pr 4:3 – 4, 10 – 11 for balanced tenderness). Too much lenience and too much harsh discipline are equally problematic. Balance comes when the child has room to grow while learning limits. The word *šiḥ*ʷ*râ* has two possibilities here; it may be translated “is careful in disciplining” (so NIV) but may be better rendered “treats him early with discipline” (see Driver,

“Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs,” 170).

25 *Contentment, reward for righteous.* Righ teous-ness is rewarded by the satisfaction of one’s physical needs. This saying is another general one based on the law’s teachings about God’s blessings (Lev 26).It could also be implying that what the righteous acquire will prove satisfying to them because they are righ teous.

NOTES

5 There is variety in the translations: The LXX has “is ashamed and without confidence”; the Targum has “is ashamed and put to the blush”; the Latin has “confounds and shall be confounded” (see further Toy, 263). The variations are due to the relation of בָּאַשׁ (*bāʾaš* “offensive to smell”) to בּוֹשׁ (*bôš*, “shame”) and how these are interpreted. Some have assumed that *ba* m,*aš* is a byword of *bôš* and so render it “cause shame.”But the use of *bāʾaš*š always carries the meaning either “cause to smell” or “cause oneself to smell (become a stench).” The translation should retain the sense “cause himself to be a stench” instead of “bring shame.”

9 The LXX adds, “Deceitful souls go astray in sins, but the righteous ness are pitiful and merciful.”

11 The LXX,Vulgate, and RSV prefer “in haste” (changing מֵהֶבֶל, *mēhebel*, “in vanity” to מְבֹהָל, *mᵉbōhāl*). The idea of “vanity” does not make a very good parallel antithetical with the idea of gradual labor, thus no doubt leading to the reading “in haste,” which is easier.

13 The LXX adds, “A crafty son will have no good thing, but the affairs of a wise servant will be prosperous; and his path will be directed rightly.”

15 The word אֵיתָן (*ʾêtān*) means either “enduring” or “filled with running water.” The idea of a stony valley that could not be cultivated is behind the translation “hard” (see Delitzsch, 280). The sense of “enduring” would give the idea that the unfaithful persist in treachery, even though this sense is otherwise positive. Driver suggests that אִי (*ʾî*, “not”) was dropped before אֵיתָן (*ʾêtān*;' “hard,” NIV) by haplography and so the reading should be “is not lasting.” The LXX, Syriac, and Targum have “destruction, destroyed,”presumably reading ,:*ʾêdām*.

23 The versions give evidence that the verse is difficult to understand. The LXX has “the righteous enjoy wealth many years, but the unjust will perish suddenly.” The Peshitta has “those who have no habitation waste wealth many years, and some waste it completely.” The Targum has “the great man devours the land of the poor, and some men are taken away unjustly.” The Latin reads

“there is much food in the fresh land of the fathers, and for others it is collected without judgment.” Toy, 277 – 78, concludes that the Hebrew text is corrupt beyond emendation.

E. Proverbs 14:1 – 35

1 The wise woman builds her house,
but with her own hands the foolish one tears hers down.
2 He whose walk is upright fears the LORD,
but he whose ways are devious despises him.
3 A fool’s talk brings a rod to his back,
but the lips of the wise protect them.
4 Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty,
but from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest.
5 A truthful witness does not deceive,
but a false witness pours out lies.
6 The mocker seeks wisdom and finds none,
but knowledge comes easily to the discerning.
7 Stay away from a foolish man,
for you will not find knowledge on his lips.
8 The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their ways,
but the folly of fools is deception.
9 Fools mock at making amends for sin,
but goodwill is found among the upright.
10 Each heart knows its own bitterness,
and no one else can share its joy.
11 The house of the wicked will be destroyed,
but the tent of the upright will flourish.
12 There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it leads to death.
13 Even in laughter the heart may ache,
and joy may end in grief.
14 The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways,
and the good man rewarded for his.
15 A simple man believes anything,
but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.
16 A wise man fears the LORD and shuns evil,
but a fool is hotheaded and reckless.
17 A quick-tempered man does foolish things,
and a crafty man is hated.
18 The simple inherit folly,
but the prudent are crowned with knowledge.

19 Evil men will bow down in the presence of the good,
and the wicked at the gates of the righ teous.
20 The poor are shunned even by their neighbors,
but the rich have many friends.
21 He who despises his neighbor sins,
but blessed is he who is kind to the needy.
22 Do not those who plot evil go astray?
But those who plan what is good find love and faithfulness.
23 All hard work brings a profit,
but mere talk leads only to poverty.
24 The wealth of the wise is their crown,
but the folly of fools yields folly.
25 A truthful witness saves lives,
but a false witness is deceitful.
26 He who fears the LORD has a secure fortress,
and for his children it will be a refuge.
27 The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life,
turning a man from the snares of death.
28 A large population is a king's glory,
but without subjects a prince is ruined.
29 A patient man has great understanding,
but a quick-tempered man displays folly.
30 A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.
31 He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker,
but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.
32 When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down,
but even in death the righteous have a refuge.
33 Wisdom reposes in the heart of the discerning
and even among fools she lets herself be known.
34 Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people.
35 A king delights in a wise servant,
but a shameful servant incurs his wrath.

COMMENTARY

1 *Prosperity, in the household.* A woman's wisdom enables the household to thrive. The contrast is between wisdom and folly; wisdom builds the house, but folly tears it down (cf. 9:1a). The text has *ḥakmôt nāšîm*, which could mean "wise

ones among women" or "wisdom of women." To see these ideas worked out, contrast the wise woman (31:10 – 31) with the foolish one (7:10 – 23). The *Midrash* uses Jochebed, the mother of Moses, as an example of wisdom, and Zeresh, Haman's wife, of foolishness (Plaut, 158). But of course it is wisdom, not the woman herself, that brings the prosperity.

2 *Fear of the Lord, uprightness.* Here is a contrast between those who fear the Lord and those who despise him — the distinction is in the conduct produced: uprightness versus perversion (see 2:15;3:32; 10:19).

3 *Speech, its effects.* What people say bears greatly on how they are received as persons. The fool's conversation brings punishment. The text literally says that it is a "rod of pride" (*ḥōṭer gaʾwâ*), with the genitive being objective (i.e., "a rod for pride").This line may seem only to be saying that his language is proud; but the contrast of the second line clarifies that his talk harms him, that he brings trouble on himself, for the speech of the righteous brings safety. Many commentators have emended the text from *gaʾwâ* to *gēwōh* (cf. *BHS*) to read "a rod for his back" (cf. NIV). This reading makes the punishment seem stronger.

4 *Prosperity, in business.* To be productive one must use the appropriate means. For the farmer, oxen are indispensable; so the wise farmer will see to it that his oxen are numerous and in good condition. Whybray, 83, connects the two lines by observing that the farmer has to balance the oxen's consumption of grain with the work they do.

5 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* This short saying explicates true and false testimony. A faithful witness does not lie (*yᵉkazzēb*), but a false witness pours out lies (*kᵉzābîm*).The saying addresses the age-old problem of false witnesses in court who hinder the quest for the truth (see 12:17; 16:10).

6 *Wisdom, those who acquire it.* Those who are serious and discerning acquire wisdom. The contrast is between the scorner (*lēṣ*) and the "discerning man" (*nābôn*). The scorner is intellectually arrogant;he lacks any serious interest in knowledge or religion. One can only guess that he pursues wisdom in a superficial way so that he might have the appearance of being wise. Plaut, 159, offers one application:those who want to read and learn will not be heard saying, "I have no time to read"; that statement is made only by those wishing to inflate their egos.

7 *Associations, unprofitable.* One cannot increase in knowledge by associating with a fool; nothing comes from nothing, as many can affirm. The first clause advises to go out from the presence of a fool. The second clause is problematic; it reads literally, “You did not know the lips of knowledge” (see Note). The verse teaches people to get away from fools, for no knowledge is gained from their speech. If you want to learn, seek out the wise.

8 *Conduct, careful consideration.* Biblical wisdom is practical theology. While the wise give careful consideration to their conduct, the way of the fool is “deception.” The word *mirmâ* (GK 5327) certainly means “deception,” but some question whether it can mean “self-deception” (see McKane, 466; D. Winton Thomas, “Textual and Philological Notes,” 286).The parallelism of this line favors that interpretation, but there is little support elsewhere for it, as the word usually means craft practiced on others (see Toy, 285). If the line is saying that the fool is deceitful, then there is only a loose antithesis.

9 *Reparation.* Folly offends, but wisdom makes amends. This verse is difficult, but it concerns offending others. The first line has “fools mock reparation [*pāšām*]”; but the verb “mock” (*yālîṣ*) is singular and the subject “fools” (*ʾwîlîm*) is plural. This had led to the suggested reading, “guilty/guilt offering mocks fools” (Toy, 287, offers Isa 1:14 and Am 5:22 as examples). The ancient versions are not much help here; the LXX has something like “houses of transgressors will owe purification.” The parallelism suggests the idea that fools ridicule reparation, whereas the upright show goodwill.

10 *Emotions, personal.* There are joys and sorrows that cannot be shared. People in their deepest emotional feelings of “bitterness” (*mārâ*) or “joy” (*śimḥâ*) alone can understand those feelings. The proverb forewarns against any unnatural or forced attempts to express empathy.

11 *Prosperity, ensured.* Personal integrity ensures domestic stability and prosperity. The contrast is a simple one and the sentiment general. For comparison see 12:7 and Job 18:15.

12 *Worldliness, its destruction.* Vice is a course of action that leads to ruin. One should be careful that any evil activity that seems successful and safe could

take any number of turns to destruction (the expression is in the plural — “roads of death”). This proverb recalls the ways of the adulterous woman in chs. 1 – 9. The first half of the verse does not state that the way that seems right is a vice, but the second half clarifies that meaning. The image used is of a traveler on a straight road; it seems safe, but it is fatal, for the destination is wrong. “Death” signifies mortal ruin (see 7:27; 16:25; also Mt 7:13 – 14).The LXX adds “Hades,” but the verse seems to be concerned with this life’s events. The issue, then, is how deceptive evil is. It may promise and deliver happiness, power, and the good life, but it cannot sustain what it gives.

13 *Emotions, mixed.* Life is filled with bittersweet things; no joy is completely free of grief. At first reading this proverb sounds pessimistic. The point must be the alternating emotions of life. This verse may also be hinting that in some superficial joyfulness there is underlying pain (*yiḵ'ab*; “ache,” NIV) and that once the joyfulness leaves, the “grief ”(*tûgâ*) is still present.

14 *Retribution, present in deeds.* This saying reminds the reader that retribution is at work: one’s deeds determine the rewards. The faithless (*sûg lēb*) are those whose heart turns aside; they will partake of their own evil ways (*yiśbaᶜ*, “be satisfied”;“be fully repaid,” NIV). The good person will find satisfaction from his ways; his deeds are rewarding.

15 *Discernment, opposite of gullibility.* Wisdom prevents gullibility. This verse contrasts the simpleton (*petî*) with the prudent (*ᶜārûm*) i.e., the youth who is untrained intellectually and morally contrasted with the wise person who has the ability to make critical discriminations. The saying shows that the *petî* is gullible; he believes every word, probably because he hears what he wants to hear. The prudent person, however, discerns every step.

16 *Evil, cautious avoidance.* Wise people are cautious and not reckless. The first line of the verse simply says that “a wise man fears and turns from evil.” Since the holy name is not used, the verse probably does not mean that he fears the Lord but fears the consequences of his actions; the wise person is thus cautious (Greenstone, 153). By contrast, the fool is reckless, self-assured, and overconfident (as McKane, 465, defines the words); he is arrogantly confident, when he of all types of people should be cautious.

17 *Character traits, distasteful.* Two character traits that are distasteful to others are a quick temper and craftiness (*mezimmâ*). The “crafty man” may be the counterpart of the quick-tempered person, although Toy, 292, thinks the expression is antithetical and translates it “but a wise man endures” (cf.Note). The quick-tempered person acts foolishly and loses people’s respect, but the malicious plotter is hated.

18 *Knowledge, evidence of prudence.* The kind of honor one receives in life is based on the amount of wisdom used.The contrast is between the simple who “inherit” (*nāḥ*ălû) folly and the prudent who are crowned with knowledge. The meaning of *kat*m*ar* (“crowned”) is a little difficult; it may not mean “are crowned” or “crown themselves” but “encircle” or “embrace.” For the verb “inherit,” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 181) proposes “are adorned” (from *ḥālâ*).

19 *Rewards, victory over the wicked.* Ultimately the wicked will acknowledge and serve the righteous.The figure used here is of a conquered people kneeling before their victors awaiting their commands. Greenstone, 154, suggests the expression “at the gates” may also imply that they are begging for favors. While this proverb has its primary focus on triumphs in this life, one cannot help but think of the ultimate fulfillment of the thought in Philip-pians 2:10.

20 *Wealth, its popularity.* Possessions determine popularity. This is just a statement of the reality of life.The poor are avoided and shunned (*yiśśānē*ᵓ, lit.,“hated”) as useless by their neighbors, but “the lovers of the rich are many” (lit. trans.).

21 *Neighbors, proper treatment of.* One cannot sin against a neighbor and hope to enjoy God’s blessings. The line contrasts the sin of despising (*bāz*) a neighbor with showing favor to the needy. In this line the neighbor is assumed to be poor or at least in need. Despising (*bāzâ*) means treating with contempt, discarding one as worthless. To ignore a neighbor in this coldhearted fashion is just as much a sin as showing favor to the poor is an act of righteousness.

22 *Conduct, good and evil.* One’s moral behavior is usually the result of planning. The image bound up in *h.ar*m*aš* is that of an artisan’s skill. The contrast is between “those who plot evil” (*ḥōrᵉšê nāᶜ*) and “those who plan good”

(*ḥōrᶜšê ṭôb*). The result of the first is going astray and of the second showing faithful love ("show love and faithfulness," NIV margin;"mercy and truth" [lit. trans.] usually describe the Lord's intervention, but here they refer to the faithful and kind dealings of the righteous).

23 *Diligence, profitable.* Profits come from hard work and not idle talk. The "hard work" here is <ᶜeṣeb(lit., "painful toil"), a term introduced in Genesis 3:19. The empty talk (lit., "words of lips") leads to poverty (see Job 11:2; 15:3; Isa 36:5). People should be more afraid of idle talk than of hard work. Or, to put it another way, don't just talk about it — do it!

24 *Wealth, a benefit for the wise.* Wisdom has its own rewards. This verse is difficult. The first line reads (lit.) "the crown of the wise is their riches." Toy, 296, suggests it means that wealth is an ornament to those who use it well. The second line seems to be saying that fools only have their folly. Consequently many follow the *BHS*'s proposal to read *wᵉliwyat* instead of ,*ʾiwwelet*to form a better parallel with the first half: "the wealth of fools is their folly" (McKane, 466). The point would be that the fool can only expect greater exposure of his folly, rather than merely saying that his folly is his folly.

25 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* Telling the truth in court effects swift justice in the outcome of a trial. The person who tells the truth "saves lives"; he is a true witness (*ʿēd ʾemet*). This person will deliver someone else from death based on a false charge by coming forward with the truth. A false testimony, however, deceives the court and brings ruin. To make this point clearer, several commentators have changed *mirmâ* ("deceit") to *merammeh* ("destroys"), though this change is not necessary. The point stands that nothing good is gained by perjury. Moreover, as Kidner, 110, says, anyone who will trim the facts for you is just as likely to do it against you.

26 *Fear of the Lord, security.* The reverential fear of the Lord leads to security. The image is of a "secure fortress" (*miḇṭaḥ-ᶜōz*) for the God-fearer and his children. The "fear" finds expression in obedience to the law, with all of its rewards and punishments, and this obedience ensures safety. The children mentioned here are the God-fearer's children, not worshipers in general. Exodus 20:5 – 6 declares that children will reap the benefits of righ teous parents if they also love the Lord; parents who fear the Lord will be a refuge for their children.

27 *Fear of the Lord, life.* Reverential fear of the Lord brings life. This line is similar to 13:14, except that “fear of the LORD” replaces “the teaching of the wise.”

28 *Power, political.* A prince’s power varies with the size of his empire. This statement is generally true of empires; from a human viewpoint political power is based on the number of people in the party.

29 *Patience, opposite of quick temper.* Patience is the evidence of understanding. The one who is patient has “great understanding”; the one who has a quick temper (*qeṣar-rûaḥ*; lit., “hasty of spirit”) exalts folly, i.e., he brings it to a full measure. So one should cultivate understanding.

30 *Contentment, its healthy benefit.* It is healthy to find contentment, for envy brings constant turmoil. Literally the verse says, “the life of the flesh [*ḥayyê bᵉśārîm*]is a heart of healing [*lēb marpē*]”The point is that a healthy spirit is the life of the body;it soothes. But envy brings pain and problems. The word *qinʾâ*(“envy”; GK 7863) describes passionate zeal, a violent excitement that is never satisfied. One who is “consumed with envy” has no tranquility.

31 *Poor, treatment of.* How people treat the poor displays their faith in the Creator. Here is the doctrine of the creation in its practical outworking.Anyone who oppresses (*ʿōšēq*) the poor shows contempt for his Maker, for that poor person also is the image of God. Showing favor (*ḥōnēn*) to the poor honors God because God has commanded this action (see Mt 25:31 – 46; cf. Pr 14:21; 17:5;19:17; see also Emerton, 202 – 22, for a meaning of *ʿšq*as “slander”).

32 *Confidence, in the midst of calamity.* Those who trust and obey the Lord have a sense of security in catastrophe. The contrast is with the wicked, who are cast down in the time of calamity; the righteous have a “refuge” (*ḥōseh*; GK 2879) even in death. So the idea is that the righteous have hope for just retribution. A problem often raised is that nowhere in Proverbs is hope for immortality found; rather, death is seen as a misfortune. Nevertheless, this verse may be a shadowy forerunner of that truth.

33 *Wisdom, its possessor.* The greatest amount of wisdom resides with those who have discernment.The second colon is a little difficult. It is normally translated as in the NIV: “even among fools she lets herself be known.” This may be ironic or sarcastic:the fool, anxious to appear wise, blurts out what he thinks is wisdom but in the process turns it to folly. The LXX negates the clause: “not known in fools.” Thomas connects the verb to the Arabic root *wd* and translates it “in fools it is suppressed” (“The Root *yd* in Hebrew,” *JTS* 35 [1934]: 302 – 3).

34 *Righ teousness, national.* The prosperity and the power of a nation depend on its righteous ness.The verb “exalt” (*rûm*) means that the people’s condition in that nation is elevated. Widespread sin, however, is a disgrace.

35 *Servants, clever and incompetent.* A servant’s competence affects a king’s attitude toward him.The wise servant is a delight, for he is the skillful, clever one (*maśkîl*); but the incompetent one (*mēbîš*; “shameful,” NIV) is the bungler who botches the king’s business and whose indiscretions and incapacity expose his master to scandal and criticism (McKane, 470).

NOTES

7 The MT has “you did not know lips of knowledge.” The Targum freely interprets this as “for there is no knowledge on his lips.”The LXX has several variations of the line, including “wise lips are weapons of discretion.” Toy, 285, wants to emend to “for his lips do not utter knowledge,” as in 15:7. But the Hebrew line makes sense as it is, even though the construction (“know lips”) is not found elsewhere.

17 The LXX reads “endures” (יִשָּׂא, *yiśśā*ʾ) rather than “is hated” (יִשָּׂנֵא, *yiśśānē*ʾ). This change seems to have arisen on the assumption that a contrast was needed; in fact, the LXX often changes the text to achieve a desired antithesis (see further Waltke, 2:580). The LXX took ʾ*îš mᵉzimmâ* in a positive sense and then changed the verb to match: “a thoughtful person endures.” The word has a positive sense, but not when it is an attributive genitive (see 12:2).The Greek can be explained away in favor of the MT’s “a crafty man is hated.”

24 Commentators find both parts of the verse improbable, even though they make good sense as they appear in the Hebrew. Toy, 296, wishes to change the first colon to read, “The crown of the wise is their wisdom,” because he finds the idea in the MT farfetched. The second line, following the LXX, makes the change from folly to “wreath.” For additional material on the Hebrew word, see M. Rotenberg, “The Meaning of ʿ*iwwelet* in Proverbs,” *Leshônênu* 25 (1960/61): 201.

32 The LXX has “in his piety” or “integrity,” as though from בְּתֻמּוֹ (*bᵉtummô*) in place of “in his death,” which is from בְּתוּמּוֹ (*bᵉtûmmô*). This variant reading involves a metathesis: *bmtw* > *btmw*.The LXX then says that the one who relies on his own piety is a righteous man. McKane, 475, prefers this reading because it avoids having any reference to the afterlife or immortality. But as Waltke, 2:583, points out, Proverbs teaches faith in the Lord, not in one’s own piety.

F. Proverbs 15:1 – 29

1 A gentle answer turns away wrath,

but a harsh word stirs up anger.
2 The tongue of the wise commends knowledge,
but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.
3 The eyes of the LORD are everywhere,
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.
4 The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life,
but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit.
5 A fool spurns his father's discipline,
but whoever heeds correction shows prudence.
6 The house of the righ teous contains great treasure,
but the income of the wicked brings them trouble.
7 The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the hearts of fools.
8 The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked,
but the prayer of the upright pleases him.
9 The LORD detests the way of the wicked
but he loves those who pursue righ teousness.
10 Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path;
he who hates correction will die.
11 Death and Destruction lie open before the LORD
—how much more the hearts of men!
12 A mocker resents correction;
he will not consult the wise.
13 A happy heart makes the face cheerful,
but heartache crushes the spirit.
14 The discerning heart seeks knowledge,
but the mouth of a fool feeds on folly.
15 All the days of the oppressed are wretched,
but the cheerful heart has a continual feast.
16 Better a little with the fear of the LORD
than great wealth with turmoil.
17 Better a meal of vegetables where there is love
than a fattened calf with hatred.
18 A hot-tempered man stirs up dissension,
but a patient man calms a quarrel.
19 The way of the sluggard is blocked with thorns,
but the path of the upright is a highway.
20 A wise son brings joy to his father,
but a foolish man despises his mother.
21 Folly delights a man who lacks judgment,
but a man of understanding keeps a straight course.
22 Plans fail for lack of counsel,
but with many advisers they succeed.

23 A man finds joy in giving an apt reply
—and how good is a timely word!
24 The path of life leads upward for the wise
to keep him from going down to the grave.
25 The LORD tears down the proud man's house
but he keeps the widow's boundaries intact.
26 The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked,
but those of the pure are pleasing to him.
27 A greedy man brings trouble to his family,
but he who hates bribes will live.
28 The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil.
29 The LORD is far from the wicked
but he hears the prayer of the righ teous.

COMMENTARY

1 *Speech, conciliatory.* The way one answers another person will have an effect on the response.This antithetical proverb stresses that it is wise to use a gentle answer to turn away wrath. More than merely gentle or soft, the idea seems to be conciliatory, i.e., an answer that restores good temper and reasonableness (McKane, 477). To use a "harsh" (<*es.eb*) word is to cause pain (same Hebrew word) and bring an angry response. The exchange between David and Nabal in 1 Samuel 25 illustrates this result; Gideon in Judges 8:1 – 3 gives a classic example of the soft answer that brings peace, whereas Jephthah illustrates the harsh answer that leads to war (Jdg 12:1 – 6; see *b. Ber.* 17a.)

2 *Speech, wise or foolish.* How wise people are can often be determined by what they say; knowledge comes from the wise and folly from fools, according to this contrast.The verb  (GK 3512) of the first colon is a little difficult. Although translated "commends," the Hebrew word is literally "makes good"or "treats in a good or excellent way" (Toy, 303).M. Dahood (*Proverbs and Northwest Semitic Philology* [Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 133; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963], 32ff.), however, suggests a change to *yt.p*, a cognate of *nt.p* ("drip"), and offers the reading, "tongues of the sages drip with knowledge."

3 *Divine omniscience.* The Lord knows everyone completely. The thought is

continuous in the two lines of this verse; it uses anthropomorphic language to stress God's exacting knowledge. But as Plaut, 169, says, this verse is not intended as a statement of theology but an incentive for conduct. Of course, for the righ teous divine omniscience is a great comfort (see also 2Ch 16:9; Ps 11:4; Heb 4:13, which show that God's purpose in this activity is salvific).

4 *Speech, helpful or harmful.* What a person says can bring either healing or harm. The teaching here affirms that healing words bring life to the spirit but perverse words crush the spirit. The Greek has *iasis* for *marpe* m,, thus giving the idea of therapy. This thought fits well with the image of the tree of life, which signifies a source of vitality to others (see McKane, 483). The contrast is the perverse, twisted, or "deceitful" (*selep*) words that crush the spirit (cf.Isa 65:14).

5 *Discipline, wisely heeded.* How well one responds to discipline reveals character. The contrast here is between the fool who spurns it and the prudent individual who heeds it. The latter shows good sense (see also v.20; 13:1, 18).

6 *Reward, for righteous ness.* Prosperity is one reward for righ teousness. This verse contrasts great treasure with the prospects of the wicked. The Hebrew of the second line says that the income of the wicked is "a thing troubled" (*neʿkārēt*). The word "trouble" (*ʿākar*) is usually calamity that one man brings on another (as illustrated by Achan, whose name (*ʿākar*) seems to reflect the word in 1Ch 2:7 [see NIV margin]). The LXX for this verse, however, has no reference to wealth but talks about amassing righ teous ness.

7 *Speech, spreading knowledge.* Wise people will spread knowledge when they speak; their words are profitable. This verse is concerned with teaching, but the verb of the first clause ("spread") does not fit the idea of the parallel clause, for a mind does not scatter. So the idea of the second colon simply should be interpreted to mean that the fool has no comprehension of knowledge (see Note).

8 *Worship, acceptable and unacceptable.* The spiritual condition of the worshiper will determine the acceptability of the worship. Here, as well as throughout the Bible, sacrifices from wicked people are unacceptable because they are insincere and blasphemous (cf. v.29; 21:3, 27; 28:9; et al.; see also 1Sa 15:22; Ps 40:6 – 8; Isa 1:10 – 17). But prayer from the righteous pleases God.

Greenstone, 162, observes that if God accepts the prayers of the righteous, he will accept their sacrifices. Sacrifice is an outward ritual and easily performed by the wicked, but prayer is a private and inward act and not usually fabricated by unbelievers.

9 *Conduct, acceptable to God.* God is pleased with the righteous. Parallel to the preceding verse, this verse uses *tôʿbat* (“detests, abominates”) to describe the life of the wicked, in contrast to *yeʾhāb* (“loves”),which describes God’s approval of the righteous.The refinements of this verse should be carefully noted: God hates *the way* of the wicked, i.e., the sin but not the sinner; and God loves those *who follow after* righteous ness (the Piel signifying persistent pursuit). Plaut, 170, says, “He who loves God will be moved to an active, persistent, and even dangerous search for justice.”

10 *Discipline, its necessity.* Discipline must be used for those who go astray, but in this discipline they may die prematurely. The “way” (*ʾōraḥ*; “path,” NIV) here is the life of righteous ness stressed throughout the book. The relationship of the two lines is probably synonymous; the “stern discipline” (*mûsār rāʿ*) of the first line is parallel to the death (*yāmût*) in the second. The point of the verse is that it is one thing to sin and find forgiveness but another altogether to refuse correction and receive such stern discipline (see also Ro 8:13).

11 *Divine omniscience.* The Lord knows every intent of every individual. The development of thought in these two lines is an argument from the lesser to the greater (“how much more”). Sheol (*šeʾôl*) and Abaddon (*ʾabaddôn*) represent the remote underworld and all the mighty powers that reside there (see 27:20; Job 26:6; Ps 139:8; Am 9:2; Rev 9:11). If that remote region with its inhabitants is open before the Lord (*neged yhwh*, which signifies irresistible omniscience), how much more the hearts of people! The word “hearts” in this verse is a metonymy for motives and thoughts (see Ps 44:21).

12 *Discipline, rejected.* The scoffer resists all efforts to reform him. This individual is fixed in his ways and will not change to live according to the wise (lit., he will not “walk with” the wise). The MT has “to the wise” (*ʾel-ḥᵃkāmîm*), but the LXX has “with.” If “to” is correct, it means that he does not seek their advice. For an illustration see the account of Ahab and Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:8.

13 *Emotions, joy and sorrow.* The emotional condition of a person has an obvious effect on body and soul. This verse uses an antithesis. Joy is inspiring and is expressed by a cheerful face, but “heartache” is depressing, i.e, “crushes the spirit.” The words used here stress the pain and the depression with a note of despair. Toy, 308, observes that the implication is also that a broken spirit is expressed by a sad face and that a cheerful face shows a courageous spirit (see also 17:22; 18:14; Isa 66:2). See Genesis 40:6 for a good illustration.

14 *Knowledge, sought by the discerning.* Those who are wise and discerning desire knowledge. This verse is similar to v.7; throughout the book knowledge is linked with righteous ness, and ignorance goes with sinfulness. The idea of the second colon, “feeds on folly”(*yirʿeh ʾiwwelet*), does not make a strong parallel to the verb “seeks” of the first half (see Note). But the poetic image of feeding signifies the acquisition of folly.

15 *Emotions, joy and sorrow.* Life can be delightful or difficult, depending on one’s circumstances and disposition.The contrast is between the “oppressed”(*ʿānî*) and the “cheerful heart” (*ṭôb-lēb*). The parallelism of the second line suggests that the <*an*m *î* are those who are inwardly oppressed. Obviously the proverb recommends the cheerful frame of mind, for the image of the feast signifies enjoyment of life’s offerings. This is far better than the evil (*nāʿôn*; “wretched,” NIV) days (see Ru 1:20 – 21; Hab 3:17 – 18).

16 – 17 *Wealth, spiritual better than physical.* These two verses stress that spiritual things are far better than material wealth. In v.16 the fear of the Lord brings more satisfaction than wealth with discontentment or, as Moffat has it, wealth with worry (Kidner, 115). “Turmoil” (*mehûmâ*) is anxiety; the reverential fear of the Lord alleviates such anxiety, for it causes contentment and tranquility, the opposite of “turmoil.” Not all wealth has this disadvantage, but when it does, it is undesirable. The tone of the proverb is caught in *m. ,Abot* 2:7: “The more possessions, the more anxiety.”

Verse 17 contrasts *ʾahăbâ*(“love”) with *śinʾâ*(“hatred”) and affirms that happy, loving relationships are more desirable than a great meal where there is hatred. Again the teaching concerns the negative side of wealth; all too often wealth replaces love in a family. The ideal is to have a loving family, friends, and great food; short of that, a humble meal with love is preferable.

18 *Patience, its affect on strife.* It takes great patience and calmness to maintain peaceful relationships.The contrast is with the “hot-tempered man” (*ʾîš ḥēmâ*) who stirs up dissension and the person who is “long or slow of anger” (*ʾerek ʾappayim* ; i.e.,“patient”). McKane, 482, seeing here a reference to litigiousness, writes: “There is the kind of person who thrives on acrimony and who seeks a pretext to transform every difference or disagreement into a bitter legal contest, and there is his opposite who will do everything in his power to minimize contention and to obviate the acerbities of litigation”(see also 14:29; 15:1).

19 *Diligence, its progress.* Diligence normally determines progress in life. This proverb says that the slothful person seems to find obstacles along the way — his way is like a hedge of thorns (*kimśukat ḥādeq*; “blocked with thorns,” NIV; the LXX has “strewn with thorns”; see Hos 2:6). The way of the upright is like a well-made road, a “highway” (*sᵉlulâ*); they have no reason to detour or swerve. For parallelism of the slothful and upright, see Proverbs 28:19 (cf. 6:10; 10:26).

20 *Wisdom, its affect on others.* Wise children affect their parents’ joy (see 10:1, which is almost the same, except that “despises” replaces “is a source of anxiety”). According to Kidner, 116, the contribution of this verse is that it describes the callousness of the one who inflicts grief on his mother.

21 *Conduct, straight course.* A valuable lifestyle must be maintained by wise decisions. The proverb shows the importance of good judgment and “understanding” (*tᵉbûnâ*, GK 9312). The fool follows any whim of fancy, and it is a delight to him because he lacks “judgment” to see the folly in it. The one who has insight follows in a “straight course.” So once again, as Toy, 312, reminds us, knowledge is the foundation of character.

22 *Speech, value of advice.* The success of plans requires using good advice (see 11:14). This general observation is of value on the personal and national level.

23 *Speech, appropriate.* It is most satisfying to be able to give timely and fitting advice. The parallelism is synonymous. The topic concerns the well thought-out and appropriate reply.To say the right thing at the right time is

satisfying; it requires knowledge and wisdom.

24 *Conduct, beneficial for life.* A life of wisdom preserves life. The first colon reads, “The way of life is upward to the wise man.” This idea is clarified by the second clause, that wise ways prevent him from going down to *šᵉ·ôl* (cf. NIV margin). There is some disagreement over the meaning of “upward” (*lᵉmaʿ·lâ*) The verse is generally taken to mean that “upward” is a reference to this physical life and “going down to the Sheol” is a reference to physical death, viz., “the grave,” because the idea of immortality is not clearly revealed in Proverbs.The point here then is that the righ teous expect to live long and healthy lives (2:20 – 22; 3:18; 5:6; 10:17;13:14). McKane argues that “upward” does not fit this worldly pattern of conduct and that it is only intelligible if taken as a reference to immortality (see Note). We may at least say that the language anticipates what later Scriptures teach about the ultimate destination of the way of life.

25 *Justice, divine.* The Lord administers his justice through righteous ness. He brings down the proud but protects the needy. Scripture amply confirms that the Lord champions the cause of the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the needy. These people were often the prey of the proud, who took their lands and houses (cf. 1Ki 21 about Naboth; cf. also Pr 16:19; Isa 5:8 – 10).

26 *Plans, pleasing to God.* The Lord is pleased with plans that have righteous intentions. The intentions or “thoughts of the wicked” are thoughts that will harm other people; these are an abomination to the Lord. The contrasting clause is difficult, the MT having *ṭᵉhōrîm ʾimrê-nōʿam* (“pleasant words are pure”). Usually “to him” is inserted to make the connection (see Note). The NIV phrases the clause “but those of the pure are pleasing to him.”

27 *Contentment, opposite of greed.* Those who are secure in their circumstances will not succumb to the evil devices of greed. The “greedy man” is the *bôṣēaʿ bāṣaʿ*, the one who wants a big cut, who is in a hurry to get rich, and who is not particular how it happens (McKane, 485). This verse is actually a warning against taking bribes. *Mattan*m *ot* m (lit., “gifts”)could be innocent enough, but they may alter one’s values (Kidner, 117). So hating bribes is the safest path to follow. For an example of avoiding this danger, see Genesis 14:22 – 24, where Abram refused to take anything for himself. See also the story of Elisha’s refusal of Naaman’s gift and Gehazi’s ruinous greed for it (2Ki 5:16, 20, 27).

28 *Speech, carefully planned.* Those who are wise are cautious in how they answer, in contrast to the wicked who blurt out vicious things. The text says literally that the mind of the righteous "weighs" (*yehgeh* , "considers, muses, meditates, studies") how to answer. The advice is to say fewer but better things. The LXX in the first colon has "the hearts of the righteous meditate faithfulness."What the wicked say is painfully "wicked" (*rāʿôt;* "evil," NIV).

29 *Prayer, God's response to.* God's response to prayer is determined by the righteous ness of the one who prays. The wicked keep distance from him, so he is "far" (*rāḥôq*) from them — an idea that signifies he is inaccessible or deaf to their appeal (cf. Ps 22). Of course, a prayer of repentance by the wicked is the exception, for by it they become the righteous (Toy, 316).

NOTES

7 Because the idea of יְזָרוּ (*yᵉzārû*, "spread, scatter") does not work with both lines of the verse, Toy, 305, suggests, with the support of the LXX, the verb יְזָרוּ (*yᵉzārû*, "preserve," from נָצַר, *nāṣar*). The Greek evidence (Symm.) for this, however, is not strong. For the second line the LXX has "hearts of fools are not safe," apparently from taking לֹא כֵן (*lō᾽-kēn*, "not so") as "unstable." McKane, 478, prefers the interpretation of "warped" or "perverse."

14 D. Winton Thomas ("Textual and Philological Notes," 285), following the reading in the LXX, suggests that instead of לֹא כֵן (*lō᾽-kēn*, "feeds") we read לֹא כֵן (*lō᾽-kēn*, with the one slight change from *resh* to *dalet* (not unusual). This word would then be connected to the Arabic *daʿa* ("sought, demanded") to form a better parallel. McKane, 478, explains that it would mean that the fool seeks out the companionship of folly.

24 The translations "upward" and "downward" are not found in the LXX (but they are in the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate). McKane, 479 – 80, favors following the LXX and deleting them to avoid the ideas of blessed immortality and afterlife punishment. He argues that these words were added afterward when the idea of immortality became prominent. But the LXX itself includes in this verse the idea of being saved from Hades (see further Waltke, 1:630).

26 The LXX has "the sayings of the pure are held in honor." The Vulgate has "pure speech will be confirmed by him as very beautiful."

IV. The First Collection of Solomonic Proverbs, Part II (15:30 – 22:16)

OVERVIEW

Those who make a careful study of the Hebrew words and the meanings of the lines propose a second collection of Solomonic proverbs in chs. 16 through 22, with the last few verses of ch. 15 serving as an introduction. While the average Bible reader may not be able to see clear distinctions in the sections of this part, some commentators lay them out as follows: 15:30 – 16:15 include the relationships between people, the king, and the Lord; 16:16 – 30 contrasts wise and foolish speech; 16:31 – 17:6 focuses on age; 17:1 – 28 is about fools; 18:1 – 21 contrasts the speech of fools versus the speech of the wise; 18:22 – 19:23 concerns wealth and wisdom in the court and the home; 19:24 – 20:11 is about fools and punishment; 20:12 – 19 concerns speech and business; 20:20 – 28 speaks of justice through the king; 20:29 – 21:31 is predominantly about righteous ness and justice; and 22:1 – 16 concerns wealth and moral instruction.

A. Relationships between People, the King, and the Lord (15:30 – 16:15)

30 A cheerful look brings joy to the heart,
and good news gives health to the bones.
31 He who listens to a life-giving rebuke
will be at home among the wise.
32 He who ignores discipline despises himself,
but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.
33 The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom,
and humility comes before honor.
16:1 To man belong the plans of the heart,
but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.
2 All a man’s ways seem innocent to him,
but motives are weighed by the LORD.
3 Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and your plans will succeed.
4 The LORD works out everything for his own ends
—even the wicked for a day of disaster.
5 The LORD detests all the proud of heart.
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.
6 Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for;
through the fear of the LORD a man avoids evil.
7 When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD,
he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.
8 Better a little with righteousness
than much gain with injustice.

9 In his heart a man plans his course,
but the LORD determines his steps.
10 The lips of a king speak as an oracle,
and his mouth should not betray justice.
11 Honest scales and balances are from the LORD;
all the weights in the bag are of his making.
12 Kings detest wrongdoing,
for a throne is established through righteousness.
13 Kings take pleasure in honest lips;
they value a man who speaks the truth.
14 A king's wrath is a messenger of death,
but a wise man will appease it.
15 When a king's face brightens, it means life;
his favor is like a rain cloud in spring.

COMMENTARY

30 *Speech, good news.* It is uplifting to hear good news. These two lines form a synonymous parallel with slight variation.The *mᵓôr-ᶜênayim* (lit., "light of the eyes"; "cheerful look," NIV) may indicate the gleam in the eyes of one who tells good news, as the parallel second clause suggests (see Note). The idea of "health to the bones" comes from a Hebrew expression that is literally "makes the bones fat," a symbol of health and prosperity (see also 17:22;25:25; Ge 45:27 – 28; Isa 52:7 – 8).

31 *Character traits, teachable.* A teachable person will become wise. This proverb forms a single sentence; it shows how the one who listens to reproof that is beneficial to life will be at home with the wise.

32 *Discipline, its benefit.* Accepting discipline is important to personal development. The person who despises discipline slights or "despises himself " (*mōʾēs napšô* means that he rejects himself as though he were of little value and so fails to grow). One must acquire understanding, especially about oneself, to grow spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.

33 *Fear of the Lord, wisdom and honor.* Humble submission in faith to the Lord brings wisdom and honor.The exact connection between the clauses is difficult. The idea of the first clause is similar to 1:7 and 9:10. Here it may mean

that “the discipline of wisdom [teaches] the fear of the LORD,” just as easily as the reverse, since the sentence is without a finite verb. The second clause has its contrast in 18:12, where pride leads to destruction; here humility brings honor. See also 22:4, where fear and humility are connected.

16:1 *Speech, divine enablement.* God sover-eignly enables people to put their thoughts into words. The verse is in the form of a contrast: “the plans of the heart” (*maʿarkê-lēb*) and the “reply of the tongue” (*maʿᵃnēh lāšôn*) are contrasted by the prepositions “belong” and “from.” The verse can be taken in one of two ways: (1) the thoughts and the speech are the same, or (2) the speech differs from what the person had intended to say. The second view fits the contrast better. This proverb, then, is actually giving the reader a glimpse of how God confounds even the wise. The word “reply”(*maʿᵃnēh*; GK 5101) in the book seems to refer to a verbal answer to another person (15:1, 23; Job 32:3, 5); so when someone is trying to speak in front of others, the Lord directs the words according to his sovereign will.

2 *Divine omniscience* . The Lord alone can evaluate our behavior because he knows our motives. The proverb is arranged in antithetical parallelism to express the only true evaluation of moral behavior. People may seem “innocent” (*zak*) in their own estimation, but self-deception and rationalization make this estimation unreliable. The word *zak* (GK 2341) is used for pure oils, undiluted liquids; here it signifies unmixed actions.The proverb suggests that such a premature opinion of oneself is naive at best and smug at the worst.

The person may be far from pure when the Lord weighs the motives (*tōkēn rûḥôt*). The figure of “weighing” signifies evaluation (see Ex 5:8 [“require”]; 1Sa 2:3; Pr 21:2; 24:12; cf. 1Sa 16:7). There may be a faint allusion to the Egyptian belief of weighing the heart after death to determine righteousness. The word *rûḥôt* is a metonymy for the motives, as in Proverbs 21:2 and 24:12 (where it is parallel to “heart”). The conclusion of the matter is that we deceive ourselves so easily and therefore cannot fully evaluate ourselves. God, by his Spirit and through his Word, provides the penetrating evaluation.

3 *Plans, committed to God.* For our plans to succeed, we must depend on the Lord. This proverb of instruction includes the result for compliance. The verb “commit” is literally “roll” (*gōl*, from *gālal*, though the LXX and Targum assume *gal* ,

“reveal”). The figure of rolling, as in rolling one’s burdens onto the Lord, is found also in Psalms 22:8[9]; 37:5;55:22. It portrays complete dependence on God. This is accomplished with a spirit of humility and by means of a diligent season of prayer, but the plan also must have God’s approval.

The syntax of the second clause shows that there is subordination: the waw on *yikkōnû*, coming after the imperative of the first clause, expresses that this clause states the purpose or result of the first.People should commit their plans to the Lord so that he may establish them. Not every plan we have is pleasing to him; but for those that are, this verse is a great comfort. Greenstone, 172, says, “True faith relieves much anxiety and smoothens many perplexities.”

4 *Retribution, divine.* God in his sovereignty ensures that everything in life receives its appropriate retribution. On the surface the verse strikes an immediate impression for God’s sovereignty, in that all God’s acts are part of his plan. Kidner, 118, says that ultimately there are no loose ends in God’s world. Since the wicked are punished in the end, this proverb adds that that punishment is his plan for them.Whybray, 93 – 94, suggests this saying could have sprung up in answer to the question, “Why did God create the wicked?”

The line of poetry is arranged with synthetic parallelism; it affirms the truth and then expands it with the specific application about the wicked.The verb *pāʿal* means “to work out, bring about, accomplish”; it is naturally used of God’s sovereign control of life (see Nu 23:23; Isa 26:12; et al.). The interpretive difficulty concerns *lammaʿănēhû*; it has been taken to mean “for his purpose” or “for its answer.”The word is *maʿăneh*(“answer, response”; see comment on v.1) and is not from *ʾmaʿan* (“purpose”).So the suffix likely refers to *kol* (“everything”). The point is that God ensures that everyone’s actions and their consequences correspond — certainly the wicked for the day of calamity. In God’s order there is just retribution for every act, for every act includes its answer or consequence.

5 *Pride, its fall.* The Lord will surely bring down those who are arrogantly proud. The idea continues from the first colon to the second, but the second explains what it means by the Lord’s hating the proud. “Proud of heart” (*gʿbah-lēb*) describes the arrogance of the one who sets himself presumptuously against God (see 2Ch 26:16; Ps 131:1; Pr 18:12). One can be absolutely sure (lit., “hand to hand,” again used to signify something that is guaranteed, as in a confirming

handshake; see comment on 11:21) that these arrogant people will not go free. “Will not go unpunished” is probably a tapeinosis here, an understatement to stress, first, that they will be punished and, second, to imply that those who humble themselves before God in faith will go free (see E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* [repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968], 159). The LXX adds several lines to this verse (see Note).

6 *Sin, freedom from.* Faithfulness to the Lord brings freedom from sin. This verse uses synonymous parallelism with a variant. One half speaks of atonement for sin and the other of avoidance of sin, so from both sides the stress is on complete freedom from sin. In the first colon we have *h.esed* (GK 2876) and ,ʾemet (GK 622) joined together;these words form a hendiadys expressing “faithful covenant love” (“love and faithfulness,” NIV). The couplet often characterizes the Lord, but here in parallel to the fear of the Lord (as in 3:3 – 7) it refers to the faithfulness of the believer. Such faith and faithfulness bring atonement for sin (yᵉkuppar ʿāwōn, the technical term for expiation of sin). Toy, 322, explains the idea by saying it affirms that the divine anger against sin is turned away and man’s relation to God is as though he had not sinned.

In the second colon we read that the person who fears the Lord “avoids evil” (*sûr mer*m*a* <m). The word rāʿ (GK 8273) can mean calamity or disaster, but it probably means sin or evildoing because it is parallel to ʿāwōn (GK 6411; see also v.17; 3:7; 4:27;13:19). Thus, reverential fear of the Lord prompts the believer to turn from evildoing.

7 *Conduct, peaceful.* A lifestyle pleasing to God disarms social hostility. This verse uses formal parallelism with a protasis and an apodasis. The subject matter of the verse is “a man’s ways” (darkê-ʾîš) that are “pleasing” (biṣôt) to the Lord. The question is who is the subject of the second clause, “he makes even his enemies live at peace [*yašlim*] with him”?The appropriate choice is the “man” and his “ways”;it is his lifestyle that disarms the enemies. McKane, 491, comments that the righteous have the power to mend relationships (see also 10:13; 14:9; 15:1, 4, 18;25:21 – 22).The life that is pleasing to God is above reproach and finds favor with others. This is part of God’s plan for rewards. But we must remember that this proverb, as well as 2 Tim othy 3:12, must not be pressed to universal application.

8 *Righteous ness, better than unjust wealth.* Few possessions with righ teous ness are better than much gain with dishonesty. The form follows the “better” sayings and so presents a contrast. There are, of course, other options (such as wealth with justice), but this line does not consider them. The “little” (*mᵉᶜat*) is not necessarily abject poverty; it could refer to modest income. To have little with righ teousness is better than unjust wealth, but the contrast is between righteousn ess and “injustice.” *Mišpāṭ* (used here with “not”) is used for both legal justice and ethical conduct. In 12:5 and 21:7 it is contrasted with righteous ness; in 21:3 it describes ethical behavior. Here unethical conduct tarnishes the great gain and will be judged by God. See a similar saying in “Amen-emope” ch. 6 and 8:19 – 20 (*ANET*, 422).

9 *Sovereignty of God.* The Lord sovereignly determines the outworking of our plans. The Bible in general teaches that only those plans that are approved by him will succeed. The verse is antithetical; the human heart “plans his course,” but the Lord fulfills or “determines his steps” (*yākîn ṣaᶜᵃḏô*).The verb *kûn* with *ṣaᶜᵃḏô* (and similar expressions) means “to direct” (see Ps 119:133; Jer 10:23). The point is the contrast between what we plan and what actually happens — God determines that. As Paul later said, God is able to do abundantly more than we ask or think (Eph 3:20; see Pr 16:1; 19:21; 20:24; see also “Amenemope” ch. 18 and 19:16 – 17 [*ANET*, 423]).

10 *Speech, responsible.* Here begins a series of proverbs about kings. This first one teaches that kings must speak righteously in their official capacities. The parallelism is loosely synonymous, perhaps forming a cause-effect arrangement.When the king speaks officially, it is as though it were “an oracle.” The word *qesem* (Gk 7877) is used throughout the Bible in the negative sense of “divination”; here it seems merely to mean words from an oracular sentence, as though the king speaks for God (see Nu 22:7; 23:23; for a popular opinion of such, see 2Sa 14:20). The effect of this is that his mouth “should not betray justice.” For a portrayal of the ideal king, see Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11:1 – 5. (For a comparison with Eze 21:23 – 26, see E. W. Davies,“The Meaning of *qesem* in Prv 16:10,” *Bib* 61 [1980]: 554 – 56.)

11 *Honesty, in business.* The Lord is the source of honesty and justice in all human enterprises. This proverb concerns weights and balances; the OT law prescribed that they be just (see Lev 19:36; Dt 25:13;Am 8:5; Mic 6:11). But shrewd people in OT times kept light and heavy weights to make dishonest

transactions (as a modern individual might keep two sets of books). But the verse, using synonymous parallelism to stress the point, affirms that righteous and just measures are from the Lord. Toy, 324, noting that the affirmation is unique in the OT, wants to change "LORD" to "king" within this context; he thinks some scribe may have thought it was a reference to the divine King.

12 *Righteous ness, stability in government.* A righteous administration determines the stability of a government. This verse displays formal parallelism, with an explanation coming in the second colon: kings detest criminal acts (*reša<*; "wrongdoing,"NIV) because their thrones are "established" (*yik-kôn*) in righteous ness. This saying stresses the ideal that righteous ness characterizes the administration in God's theocracy (see Dt 17:19 – 20; 2Sa 7:13 – 16;Isa 32:1).

McKane, 492, includes a lengthy discussion probing the parallel in Egyptian practices, where a pedestal is portrayed under the throne that resembles the hieroglyph for *Ma<at* ("justice" or "the divine order"), indicating that the throne was founded on justice. Solomon likewise used pedestals (1Ki 10:18 – 20). McKane is not convinced that the parallel is helpful, since the idea of a righteous basis for government was common. Interestingly, if this proverb had been written after the monarchy had disintegrated, there would have been greater variance between the ideal and the real. But coming from the golden age of Solomon, the ideal was still credible.

13 *Honesty, approved by leaders.* People who are honest and candid are valuable to governments.Political leaders know that without such their domains would become anarchic. This little saying uses synonymous parallelism to make the point.Those who speak uprightly please (*r<ṣôn;* "take pleasure in," NIV) kings; they love (*ye>hāb;*‘ "value," NIV) those who speak uprightly. Ideal rulers love righteousness and not flattery (Plaut, 179).

14 *Wisdom, in appeasing wrath.* The wise person knows how to pacify the unexpected or irrational anger of leaders. This proverb introduces the danger of becoming a victim of such caprice. By using formal parallelism, it presents a dictum and then a consequence. The first colon describes the "wrath" (*ḥ<mat*) of the king as "messengers of death"(*mal>kê-māwet*). An example of this is Solomon's assassinations of Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei in 1 Kings 2:25, 29 – 34, 46. When the wrath of the king so threatens, a wise man will try to pacify or "appease it."

15 *Encouragement, from rulers.* Favor from a king is encouraging to his people. This proverb is the antithesis of v.14. By using two metaphors the saying describes the benefits of having a king who is pleased with his subjects. The king's brightened face signifies his delight and thus means life for those around him (as opposed to his wrath). The favor this symbolizes is like the "rain cloud" — the latter rain or harvest rain, which is necessary for a successful harvest. Some of these ideas are similar to Psalm 72:15 – 17, which portrays the prosperity of the land as a blessing on account of the ideal king, whose righteous reign seems to ensure prosperity.

NOTES

15:30 For “a cheerful look” the LXX has “the eye that sees beautiful things” or “that sees well.” But the parallelism requires something that is seen and not the pleasure of seeing. For מְאוֹר (*mᵉʾôr,*‘ “light [of the eyes]”), D. Winton Thomas (“Textual and Philological Notes,” 285) suggests pointing a Hophal participle *mor*m,*ê* and reading, “a fine sight cheers the mind.”

16:5 The LXX has inserted two couplets: “The beginning of a good way is to do justly, and it is more acceptable with God than to offer sacrifices; he who seeks the Lord will find knowledge with righ teous-ness, and they who rightly seek him will find peace.” Toy, 321 – 22, notes that there were many proverbs and sayings that sound like those in the canonical book of Proverbs; these similar-sounding sayings are in the LXX’s version of Proverbs and in Sirach.

B. Wise and Foolish Speech (16:16 – 30)

16 How much better to get wisdom than gold,
to choose understanding rather than silver!
17 The highway of the upright avoids evil;
he who guards his way guards his life.
18 Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.
19 Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed
than to share plunder with the proud.
20 Whoever gives heed to instruction prospers,
and blessed is he who trusts in the LORD.
21 The wise in heart are called discerning,
and pleasant words promote instruction.
22 Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it,
but folly brings punishment to fools.
23 A wise man’s heart guides his mouth,
and his lips promote instruction.
24 Pleasant words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
25 There is a way that seems right to a man,

but in the end it leads to death.

26 The laborer's appetite works for him;
his hunger drives him on.

27 A scoundrel plots evil,
and his speech is like a scorching fi re.

28 A perverse man stirs up dissension,
and a gossip separates close friends.

29 A violent man entices his neighbor
and leads him down a path that is not good.

30 He who winks with his eye is plotting perversity;
he who purses his lips is bent on evil.

31 Gray hair is a crown of splendor;
it is attained by a righ teous life.

32 Better a patient man than a warrior,
a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city.

33 The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD.

COMMENTARY

16 *Wisdom, better than wealth.* Wisdom is more valuable than money.This didactic saying follows the pattern of the "better" sayings. Wisdom and wealth are not incompatible, but this comparison is between wealth without wisdom and wisdom without wealth.McKane, 489, says, "Wealth without wisdom may be vulgarity or greed or ruthless individualism."The point of the verse is to encourage people to acquire wisdom and understanding (cf. 3:14).

17 *Righteousness, prevention of evil.* Righ teous living is a safeguard against calamity. The parallelism of these lines is probably synthetic: the first asserts that integrity avoids evil, and the second explains further that the person who guards his way protects his life. In the first colon the point of righteous living is made with the image of a "highway" (*mᵉsillâ*), a raised and well-graded road. This well-cared-for life, this integrity, turns from or "avoids evil"(*sûr mēʿāᶜ*, with *rāᶜ* in the sense of "sinful living").The metaphor of the "way" (*mᵉsillâ // darkô*) is carried into the second colon: he "guards" his way and thereby safeguards his life. The LXX adds several lines here as well (see Note).

18 *Pride, its consequences.* Pride leads inevitably to a downfall. In fact, pride

is the first step down.The lines are synonymous. “Pride” (*gā’ôn*) and the “haughty spirit” (*gob*m*ah rûah*.) are paired; and “destruction” (*šeber*) and “fall” (*kiššālôn*, lit., “a tottering, falling”) are matched. Many similar sayings have warned against pride and arrogance. An Arabic proverb says, “The nose is in the heavens, the seat is in the mire.” McKane, 490, sees another implication in the words of this proverb: “ ‘Disintegration’ suggests a contrast with the man who has achieved wholeness [*šal*m*ôm*] by submitting to *mûsar*m and learning wisdom; and ‘stumbling’ a contrast with the safe road along which the teacher directs his attentive and receptive pupils.”

19 *Humility, better than plunder.* Better to be oppressed than to oppress.This, another “better” saying, presents a contrast of relative values. It is better to have a low spirit (*šᵉpal-rûaḥ*) and be among the poor than to share the “plunder” (*šālāl*; “loot” as Whybray, 95, translates it) with the “proud” (*gēʾîm*)The “proud”and the “lowly” here are ethical and religious descriptions for the proud rebel, who is overbearing and oppressive, and for the humble person, who submits to God and is unassuming and inoffensive (cf. Toy, 328). One should cultivate a humble spirit regardless of economic status, but one should never share the loot of those antagonistic to God.

20 *Faithfulness, its blessing.* Faithfulness to the Lord brings his blessing. This simple proverb uses synonymous parallelism to make the basic point about the reward for the righteous. The person who trusts in the Lord and “gives heed to instruction” will be blessed by him; he will find earthly prosperity and heavenly bliss from living a life that is right with God.

21 *Speech, competent.* Wise speech builds a reputation for competence and enhances influence. It leads to the reputation of being “discerning,” and its influence coming from sweet or “pleasant words”(*meteq sᵉpātayim*, i.e., gracious and friendly words) is to “promote instruction” (or “increase appro-priation”); i.e., the teaching will be well received because it is persuasive.

22 *Prospect for life, good or bad.* An individual’s prospects in life are determined by his wisdom.Here is another antithetical saying. “Understanding” (*śēkel*) is a “fountain of life” (see 10:11; 13:14;14:27; 18:4), but “folly” (*ʾiwwelet*) brings “punishment” to fools. This “punishment” (*mûsar*) is essentially requital for sin. Once again Proverbs affirms that there is little that can be done for or

with the fool.Alden, 129, astutely notes, “It is highly unlikely that Solomon would accept the idea that all men are created equal and thus deserve education at government expense.”

23 *Speech, wise.* Those who are wise ensure that they say wise things. The parallelism is synthetic, the first asserting that the wise heart “guides” the mouth, and the second line adding that he increases the reception of what he says (see v.21).

24 *Speech, beneficial.* Pleasant words are comforting and encouraging. The subject matter here is ʾimrê-nōʿam(“pleasant words”). They are first described as “a honeycomb” (see Ps 19:10[11]).Then the added predicates are “sweet” (mātôq) and “healing” (marpē) One may recall, in line with the use of this imagery, how Jonathan’s eyes brightened when he ate the honeycomb (1Sa 14:27); such is the uplifting effect of pleasant words.

25 *Conduct, its consequence.* Conduct that seems to be right may end in disaster. This proverb is identical to 14:12 (see comments). The formal parallelism develops a continuous idea; but the contrast is with the “way” that seems right and the “ways of death” (darkê-māwet;‘ “leads to death,” NIV), which in the end provide the reality for the shortsighted evaluation.

26 *Diligence, its motivation.* Hunger drives people to work diligently. Here is a classification of labor and its primary incentive — need. “Labor” (ʿāmēl) is boring drudgery; motivations are necessary to its continuance, and hunger is the most frequent motivation. The word “appetite” is literally “soul” (nepeš) that part of human nature that craves food; for the “life” (nepeš) is a bundle of appetites. The second clause adds an explanatory idea: his “mouth” (*pîhû* ;“his hunger,” NIV) presses him on. The sense of the passage seems clear enough (though there are variant readings; see Note; cf. also Eph. 4:28; 6:7; 2Th 3:10 – 12; Ecc 6:7).

27 *Conduct, malicious.* Scoundrels plan ways to slander people. This verse is in formal parallelism, the thought continuing from one colon to the next. The “scoundrel” is literally a “man of belial” (ʾîš bᵉlîyyaʿal). The meaning of “worthless” has been frequently given to bᵉlîyyaʿal, but that is too weak. The term describes deep depravity and wickedness (see Toy, 125 – 26, where he first discusses the term). This is a wicked person, for “he digs up evil.” The meaning of kōreh(“plots,”

NIV) is that of bringing evil to the surface (cf. 26:27; Jer 18:20). What he finds he spreads. His speech is like scorching fire; the simile speaks of the devastating effect of his words. McKane, 494, says that he "digs for scandal and . . . propagates it with words which are ablaze with misanthropy."

28 *Speech, divisive.* Slanderers and gossips cause divisions. The wicked is described as "a perverse man" (*îš tahpukôt*, lit., "a man of falsehoods, a liar") and a "gossip" (*nirgān*), viz., one who whispers and murmurs (18:8; 26:20, 22). This kind of person destroys close friendships (*allûp*) by what he says. Rashi took ,(*allûp*)in the sense of "a prince" and said that such speech alienates the Prince, namely, God. But that interpretation is unnecessary.

29 *Associations, evil.* Violent people influence others toward violence (note the synthetic parallelism, the second part adding to the first). The man of violence (*ḥāmās*; GK 2805) will influence his acquaintances toward violence. (*ḥāmās*; often refers to sins against society, social injustices, and crimes. The "path that is not good" must refer to habits of crime. The point is to warn people to keep away from such villains.

30 *Character traits, wicked expressions.* Often people who plan wicked things betray themselves with malicious expressions. Two expressions are depicted here: winking the eye and pursing the lips. Facial expressions often reveal whether someone is plotting something evil (see 6:13 – 14). Mannerisms and character are closely linked. Plaut, 182, suggests that there may be another way to understand this verse, namely, that a person who sees no evil and hears no evil is a social detriment and by his passivity brings evil to pass. But most likely the verse is associating the expressions with malicious intent.

31 *Rewards, long life.* Righ teousness is rewarded with longevity. This proverb presents the ideal, of course, for the saying does not include evil old men or good people who die young. The equity envisioned in Proverbs is that the wicked come to an early end but the righteous endure. Toy, 333, suggests that the NT clarifies this teaching by explaining how immortality guarantees the long-lasting reward. Proverbs is concerned with longevity in this life, however. "Gray hair" (*sêabâ*) is the "crown of splendor"; it can only be attained through righteous ness. While the proverb presents a simplified observation, there is something commendable about old age that can remember a long walk with God

through life and can anticipate unbroken fellowship with him in glory.

32 *Patience, more effective than power.* Patience is preferable to physical power. A “patient” (ʾerek ʾappayim, lit., “long of anger”) man rules or “controls” (mōšēl) his “spirit” (*rûah* .; “temper,” NIV).Normally ,ʾerek ʾ*appayim* is an attribute of God (see Ex 34:6); here it describes a patient person. “Controls his spirit” means that such a person has his emotions under control. This saying would have significant meaning in a time when military prowess was held in high regard. *M*.g alt="ui.png" src="D:/eBookstudio/OUTPUT/0310234980_content/ui.png" inline="1" />4:1 uses this proverb to answer the question, Who is a true hero? Greenstone, 180, records the account from Nachmias about the pious man who said to the king, “You are the servant of my servant.” He meant by this, “You are the slave of your evil inclinations, while I am their master.”

33 *Sovereignty of God.* The Lord controls the decisions that are submitted to him. The passage concerns the practice of seeking divine leading through casting lots. “Every decision” (*kol-mišpat*mô .) is from the Lord (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 18;19:16 – 17 [*ANET,* 423]). So Proverbs 16 ends as it began, with a word about God’s sovereignty.

NOTES

17 The LXX adds three lines after v.17a and one after v.17b: “The paths of life turn aside from evils, and the ways of righteousness are length of life; he who receives instruction will be prosperous, and he who regards reproofs will be made wise; he who guards his ways preserves his own soul, and he who loves his life will spare his mouth.”

26 The LXX may have misread פִּיהוּ (*pîhû*, “his hunger” [lit., “his mouth,” meaning “his hunger”]) as *pîdô* to get the idea of “ruin” for the laborer — he drives away ruin. This reading influenced the Syriac to some degree; however, its first clause understands suffering instead of labor; the person who causes suffering suffers.

C. About Fools (17:1 – 28)

1 Better a dry crust with peace and quiet
a house full of feasting, with strife.

2 A wise servant will rule over a disgraceful son,
and will share the inheritance as one of the brothers.

3 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but the LORD tests the heart.

4 A wicked man listens to evil lips;
a liar pays attention to a malicious tongue.

5 He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker;
whoever gloats over disaster will not go unpunished.

6 Children’s children are a crown to the aged,
and parents are the pride of their children.

7 Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool —
how much worse lying lips to a ruler!

8 A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it;
wherever he turns, he succeeds.

9 He who covers over an offense promotes love,
but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.

10 A rebuke impresses a man of discernment
more than a hundred lashes a fool.

11 An evil man is bent only on rebellion;
a merciless official will be sent against him.
12 Better to meet a bear robbed of her cubs
than a fool in his folly.
13 If a man pays back evil for good,
evil will never leave his house.
14 Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam;
so drop the matter before a dispute breaks out.
15 Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent —
the LORD detests them both.
16 Of what use is money in the hand of a fool,
since he has no desire to get wisdom?
17 A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity.
18 A man lacking in judgment strikes hands in pledge
and puts up security for his neighbor.
19 He who loves a quarrel loves sin;
he who builds a high gate invites destruction.
20 A man of perverse heart does not prosper;
he whose tongue is deceitful falls into trouble.
21 To have a fool for a son brings grief;
there is no joy for the father of a fool.
22 A cheerful heart is good medicine,
but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.
23 A wicked man accepts a bribe in secret
to pervert the course of justice.
24 A discerning man keeps wisdom in view,
but a fool's eyes wander to the ends of the earth.
25 A foolish son brings grief to his father
and bitterness to the one who bore him.
26 It is not good to punish an innocent man,
or to flog officials for their integrity.
27 A man of knowledge uses words with restraint,
and a man of understanding is even-tempered.
28 Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent,
and discerning if he holds his tongue.

COMMENTARY

1 *Peace, its value.* Poverty with peace is better than prosperity with strife. This contrast makes a preference for the better of two circumstances. On one

side is the “dry crust” with quietness. Pat,mg alt="uk.png" src="D:/eBookstudio/OUTPUT/0310234980_content/uk.png" inline="1" />is like bread without butter, a morsel of bread not dipped in vinegar or some such mix (cf. Ru 2:14).In this humble setting there is “quiet” (*šalwâ*; the LXX reads *šālôm*“peace”), which is better than a house of feasting with “sacrifices of strife” (*zibh.ê-rîb*; cf. NIV margin).

The use of *zibḥê*suggests a connection with the temple (see comments on 7:14) in which the people may have made their sacrifices and had abundant meat to eat. It is also possible that the reference is simply to a sumptuous feast, for the term can also refer to this (see Dt 12:15; Isa 34:6; Eze 39:17).Rarely did the Israelites have meat apart from sacrificial occasions. The contrast formed is not between the morsel and the meat but between peace and strife. Abundance often brings a deterioration of moral and ethical standards and an increase in envy and strife.

2 *Ability, better than privilege.* Faithful and prudent servants are more highly honored than disgraceful sons. The verse expresses one continuous thought, although the two lines do reflect parallel ideas with “ruling” and “inheriting.” The setting is the ancient world, in which servants rarely advanced beyond their station in life. Notable exceptions are the servant of Abram (who would have been Abram’s heir if there had been no son, Ge 15:3), the slave who married into the line of Judah and became an heir (1Ch 2:35), and Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth (2Sa 16:1 – 4; 19:24 – 30).This proverb focuses on the prudent or “wise servant,” who uses all his abilities effectively.This one rules over the “disgraceful son” by becoming a joint heir with the brothers. This means that the worthless son will be disinherited.

3 *Divine omniscience.* The Lord examines every thought and every motive. The imagery is of silver and gold being purified, parallel to the Lord’s “testing” (*bōḥēn*) human hearts. Such examinations are always constructive; they are designed to improve the value of what is purified.

4 *Speech, malicious.* The wicked find destructive speech appealing. The synonymous parallelism stresses that those who listen to malicious talk are in fact malicious themselves — birds of a feather. The “wicked man” (*mēnaᶜ*) listens to wicked or “evil”(*ʾāwen*) lips, the “liar” (*šeqer*) pays attention to the “malicious

tongue” (*lᵉšôn ḥawwōt*). The metonymies “lips” and “tongue” signify speech, and the qualifications show this speech to be destructive. Leviticus 19:17 warns people to rebuke those with malicious words and not to bear evil with them. Plaut, 186, explains that people who listen to gossip are just as guilty of it as those who spread it.

5 *Speech, mocking the poor.* Anyone who mocks the misfortune of the poor holds the Creator in contempt and will be punished. The parallel clauses identify the subject matter: “mocking the poor” (*lōʿēg lānāš*) and “gloating over disaster” (*śāmēaḥ lᵉʾêd*, though *BHS* proposes *lᵉʾōbēd*, “to the one perish-ing”). The “disaster” is meant to explain the poverty.

The second part of each colon diverges: the first one explains that whoever mocks the poor reproaches or “shows contempt for” his Maker; the second line affirms that the mocker will be punished. The idea of reproaching the Creator may be mistaking and blaming God’s providential control of the world (Toy, 337). Plaut, 187, explains that whoever mocks the poor holds up their poverty to them as a personal failure and so offends their dignity and divine nature (as in 14:31). He adds that it is easier to rejoice over calamity than over good fortune.

6 *Honor, in family relationships.* People treasure their family heritage. The synonymous parallelism here focuses on this point from two sides — grandchildren are a crown to the aged, and parents are an honor to children. This idea comes from a culture that places great importance on the family in society; the older folks have preeminence in the family and receive the appropriate respect. On the clause that affirms that parents are an honor to children, Plaut, 187, wryly comments, “Except, perhaps, in adolescence. Indeed, a family without full self-acceptance is in a state of perpetual immaturity.”

7 *Speech, dishonest.* A dishonest leader is worse than an arrogant fool. The first thesis lays the point for comparison: “Arrogant lips are unsuited to a fool.” The word *yeter* (“arrogant”) could also be rendered “excellent” (see Note). It describes lofty speech, and this does not suit the fool. *Nābāl* (“fool”; GK 5572) occurs only here, in v.21, and in 30:22 in Proverbs. It describes someone who is godless and immoral in an overbearing way (see 1Sa 25:25; Ps 14:1). Lofty speech, whether great claims or arrogant opinions, is simply out of character for the fool.

The second line makes the point: “How much worse lying lips to a ruler!” This *nādîb* (“ruler”) is a gentleman with a code of honor, to whom truthfulness is almost second nature (McKane, 507). Lies simply are not suited to him. So the lesson is that if fools should not speak lofty things, then certainly honorable people should not lie.

8 *Bribery, its success.* Those who use bribery meet with widespread success. This line is a little troubling; but as Toy, 341, clarifies, the sage is merely affirming a point of reality without making a comment. The first colon says that a bribe is a “stone of grace” (*ʾeben-ḥēn*; “charm,” NIV); the second line adds that everywhere the briber turns with it, “he succeeds” (*yask*a *îl*; “deals wisely”).

The word for “bribe” (*šōḥad*; GK 8816) could simply refer to “a gift” that opens doors, insofar as it was the custom to offer a gift for most occasions. This would not be as problematic as a bribe and fits well in this positive statement (Whybray, 100). The law clearly prohibited taking bribes (Ex 23:8); true bribery is described in v.23. But (*šōḥad*; is never used of a disinterested gift, so there is always something of the bribe to it (see Ps 15:5; Isa 1:23).The proverb is expressing this reality from the viewpoint of the one giving the bribe — it works. *ʾEben-ḥēn* indicates that it is a stone that brings “favor”; McKane, 502, says that it has magical properties and works like a charm. It is a “lucky” stone.

9 *Love, shown by discretion.* How people respond to the faults of others reveals whether or not they have compassion. This proverb is an antithetical statement, showing the contrast between “he who covers over an offense” of a friend and the one who “repeats” the news about it; the former promotes love and the latter separates friends. There can be no friendship without such understanding and discretion. Plaut, 188, says such friendship requires the ability to forget; harping on the past has destroyed many friendships and marriages. The point is that for the sake of love, the true friend buries the wrong done; Mckane, 508 – 9, describes the antithesis this way:

> On the one hand the person who believes that love is better served by a charitable silence than by a campaign of exposure and, on the other, the person who breaks up friendships — other men’s friendships, not his own — by scandalous gossip.Even if this is done with a kind of zeal for the welfare of the community, the means are not justified by the end, for it is an activity which will destroy love and trust and so destroy what it sets out to preserve. And those who begin as crusaders

will be degraded by what they supposed to be their mission in life and will become common informers and persecutors.

10 *Discipline, of value to the discerning.* Discipline will benefit the wise but not the foolish. This verse contrasts the wise and the fool over the matter of "rebuke" (*gᶜārâ*). Those who are wise will be humbled by a rebuke and learn from it, but not even a hundred lashes will make such an impression on the "fool" (*kᵉsîl*; GK 4067). The proverb may also be saying that in general physical punishment is less effective than criticism.

11 *Retribution, its certainty.* Those bent on rebellion will surely meet with severe retribution. The formal parallelism lines up a cause-and-effect relationship. The cause is that evil people seek rebellion, and its effect is that retribution will be sent in the form of a "merciless official" (*malʾāk ʾakzārî*). This expression could refer to a pitiless messenger the king would send; but it also could refer to storms, pestilence, or any misfortune that served as God's messenger of retribution.

12 *Associations, dangerous.* It is dangerous to encounter a fool engaged in folly. A contrast stresses this point. The first clause literally says, "Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man" (see 2Sa 17:8;Hos 13:8). The contrast explains that this would be less dangerous than meeting a "fool" (*kesîl*) engaged in "his [wicked] folly" (*ʾiwwaltô*) The human, who is supposed to be intelligent and rational, in such folly becomes more dangerous than the beast that in this case acts with good reason. As Alden, 134, comments, "Consider meeting a fool with a knife, or gun, or even behind the wheel of a car" (cf. Samuel E. Loewenstamm, "Remarks on Proverbs 17:12 and 20:27," *VT* 37 [1987]: 221 – 24).

13 *Justice, for ingratitude.* Acts of ingratitude will be punished accordingly.This saying presents a condition and its consequences: The condition is when someone repays "evil" (*rāᶜâ*) for "good" (*ṭôbâ*), and the consequences are that the punishment fits the crime — "evil" (*rāᶜâ*) will never leave his house. The verse does not explain whether God will turn evil back on that person directly or whether people will begin to treat him as he treated others. Moreover, the verse does not justify rewarding evil for evil.

14 *Strife, controlled.* Conflicts must be stopped before they get out of control.

The proverb presents a cause and its effect. The first line says that starting a "quarrel" (*mādôn*) is like "letting out water" (*pōṭēr**mayim*; "breaching a dam," NIV). The image is of a small leak, perhaps in a dam, that starts slowly to spurt water; the problem will only get worse. The second line gives the advice: stop it before "strife" (*rîb*; "a dispute," NIV) breaks out. McKane, 505, notes that this probably refers to litigation (see 15:18, where both *mad*m *ôn* and *rîb* are used). The lesson is to stop a quarrel before it gets to court, for a legal victory makes a disagreement permanent.

15 *Justice, corrupted.* The Lord hates any miscarriage of justice.This proverb uses effective wordplays to express the two things the Lord hates — declaring "righteous" (*mas.dîq*; "acquitting," NIV) the person who is a "guilty [criminal]" (*rāšāʿ*), and "declaring guilty" (*maršîʿ*; "condemning," NIV) the person who is "righteous" (*s.addîq*; "innocent," NIV). Such reversals are an abomination for the righteous Judge of the whole earth.

16 *Wisdom, inaccessible to fools.* The fool has no interest in obtaining wisdom in the way that it must be obtained. This continuous sentence asks a rhetorical question — in effect, What good is money, since what is needed cannot be bought? The person under consideration here is the "fool" (*kesîl*), the one who lacks the intellect to gain wisdom in the first place (Toy, 346). He may desire the reputation of the wise, but he will not live up to its demands.McKane, 505, envisions a situation in which a *kesîl* comes to a sage with a fee in hand and supposing that he can assure a career as a sage, thus giving rise to the biting comment presented here: Why does the fool have money in his hands? To buy wisdom when he has no brains?

17 *Friends, loyal in adversity.* The love of a true friend is constant. The verse is set in synonymous parallelism; i.e., the "friend" and the "brother" are equated. Faithful "love" (*ʾōhēb*) is present at all times, even in times of "adversity" (*ṣārâ*), when it might be severely tested.

Some take the two lines as antithetical. Plaut, 189, for example, argues that friendship is a spiritual relationship, but a brother's ties are based on a blood relationship. He adds, "No wonder that adversity is frequently the only unifying force in many families." But the line is not implying that the brother confines his kindness to times of adversity; moreover, the brother does not always come

forward at such times (see 18:19, 24; 19:7; 27:10). Here the true friend is the same as a brotherly relation. *Lesa*. *r*m*â* may be translated “of adversity” — it is in such times of adversity that this strong friendship is displayed.

18 *Wisdom, in business.* It is foolish to pledge security for someone else’s loans. The parallelism is synthetic. The lack of judgment is introduced with the idea of striking hands and then clarified by “puts up security” (see also 6:1 – 5).

19 *Speech, arrogant and contentious.* Arrogant and contentious speech ends in destruction.The double focus is on the one who “loves a quarrel [*mas*.*s*.*â*]” in v.19a and the one who “builds a high gate” in v.19b. Some have taken the latter expression literally and interpreted it to mean pretentious house building, but that would be an unusual expression in the OT. Probably it is figurative; the gate is the mouth, and so to make it high is to say lofty things — he brags too much (see 1Sa 2:3; Pr 18:12;29:23).The figure is comparable to the use of “trap” for mouth in American English.Toy, 348, wishes to emend the text to *pîw* (“his mouth”) for clarity, but there is no need to do so; the figure can be properly interpreted that way.

Thus, the proverb is about a quarrelsome and arrogant individual who loves “sin” (*peša*ᶜ) and invites “destruction” (*šāber*). The destruction could be what he inflicts on others but may also mean what he brings on himself.The latter fits the parallel *pešaᶜ* a little better (though Toy also wishes to emend *pešaᶜ* to “wounds” for the sake of parallelism).

20 *Conduct, wicked.* Wicked ways and words lead to trouble. The synonymous parallelism makes this verse fairly easy to understand. The wicked person has a “perverse” heart (i.e., he is morally crooked) and a “deceitful tongue” (i.e., he has turned away from the truth). All who are wicked in their plans and speech can expect only trouble ahead. The idea of “trouble” (*rāᶜâ*) refers to calamity or adversity in this life; such people face a life without good (meaning prosperity in this life).

21 *Folly, a grief to others.* It is a grief to parents to have children become fools. It is not always a completely joyous experience to have children, not with the world and human nature as they are. Here *kesîl* (GK 4067) and *nābāl* (GK 5572) are put in synonymous parallelism — they are almost the same.However,

kesîl (which occurs about fifty times in the book) portrays a slow-witted dullard, whether it be in spiritual, intellectual, or moral matters; *nābāl* (a rare term in Proverbs) primarily focuses on religious folly and refers to one who is morally and religiously indifferent (Toy, 348). In this situation a father who hoped for a son who would be a credit to the family and the faith may find only disappointment.

22 *Emotions, affect on health.* One's psychological condition affects one's physical condition: a healthy attitude fosters good health, but a depressed spirit ruins health. The antithetical idea, describing the two effects, stresses the importance of a cheerful heart. The first line presents the ideal: a "cheerful heart" (*lēb śāmēaḥ*) causes "good healing" (*yĕṭîb gēhâ*;"is good medicine," NIV). The heart, as with the spirit in v.22b, refers to the mind, the psyche. A positive and healthy outlook on life brings healing.On the other hand, a "crushed spirit" (*rûaḥ nᵉkēʾâ*), i.e., one that is depressed or dejected, has an adverse effect on the health of the body. "Bones" figuratively represents the body (encased in the bony frame); fat bones means a healthy body (3:8; 15:30;16:24), but dry bones signify unhealthiness and lifelessness (cf. Eze 37:1 – 14).

23 *Justice, perverted by bribes.* Bribery perverts justice. This single sentence uses a purpose clause to explain the intent of a bribe. The "wicked" who accepts the "gift" is a corrupt judge or some other official with similar power (see comment on v.8).The fact that he accepts it in secret (lit., "from the bosom," *mēḥêq*) indicates it is not proper. The purpose clause clarifies that the bribe is "to pervert the course of justice."

24 *Discipline, concentration on plans*.The wise persist in following a course of wisdom.They comprehend the true issues of life and concentrate on the path of wisdom. The "fool" (*kesîl*), however, lacks any serious concentration and is unable to fix his attention on anything, so he drifts in the limitless sea of uncertainty (Toy, 351). McKane, 504, vividly depicts these distinctions when he says:

> The eyes of the *mēbîn* ["discerning man"] are riveted on the teacher, for he is fascinated by her instruction and is a picture of unbroken concentration.The *kesîl* ["fool"] has the wandering eye and the vacant distracted mind, and his condition is expressed by a hyperbole. As a student who is hearing nothing of what his teacher says might let his eyes rove to every corner of the classroom, so the fool who is inattentive to the instruction of Wisdom is said to have his eyes on the ends of the earth.

25 *Folly, its effect on parents.* It is a bitter grief to have a child turn out to be a fool (see v.21; 10:1;15:20).

26 *Punishment, unjust.* It is a mistake to punish people who are innocent. The two halves of this verse appear to be in synonymous parallelism, but the exact relation between them is a little more complicated. Rather than simply citing two examples of injustice, the second scenario is perhaps being used to show how wrong the first one is, viz., punishing the righteous makes about as much sense as flogging an official for his integrity. But if the two lines are simply synonymous, then the "officials" (*nᵉdîbîm*) are the good people.*Nādîb*("noble") is used elsewhere in contrast to the fool (see comment on v.7; cf. Isa 32:5 – 8). The verse clearly affirms that punishing (lit., "fining")the righteous is "improper" (*ᶜal-yōšer,* lit., "contrary to what is right"; "for integrity," NIV).

27 *Character traits, self-control.* The wise restrain their speaking and control their actions. The text literally says that he is "sparing" (*ḥôśēk*) of words and "cool of spirit" (*qar-rûah* .; "even-tempered," NIV).The one who restrains his speech is the truly knowledgeable person, and the one who has cool composure has understanding. So the instruction is that to gain composure and restraint one must develop knowledge and understanding.

28 *Speech, wisdom of silence.* Silence is one evidence of wisdom. Even a fool appears wise in silence — at least he conceals his folly by keeping silent. Kidner, 127, says that a fool who takes this advice is no longer a complete fool. He does not, of course, become wise; he just hides his folly. An old saying explains that no one knows that he nothing knows, unless he talks too much (Plaut, 192).

NOTES

4 The verb מְזֹן (*mēzôn*) is from זִין (*zîn,* "to feed").The suggested emendation is to take it as a denominative verb from אֹזֶן (*ʾōzen,* "ear"), "pay attention to."

6 The LXX has inserted, "To the faithful belongs the whole world of wealth, but to the unfaithful not an obolus [a very small coin]." This was apparently a popular sentiment.

7 There is some question over the best translation of יֶתֶר (*yeter*; NIV "arrogance"). The basic idea of "remainder" or "excess" has yielded derived meanings of "excellence,""heightened," and "arrogance."The LXX, using πιστά (*pista*), seems to reflect the idea of excellence and makes a contrast: "Words that are excellent do not fit a fool." The concept of "arrogance" works if it is taken in the sense of lofty, heightened, or excessive language.

14 The lines are difficult.The LXX misread the words in the text and gave it a legal sense; accordingly it developed a different proverb:"The beginning of righteous ness gives authority to words, but quarrelsomeness and fighting lead to poverty" (see James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1968], 257). But Toy, 349, says that the Greek reading of "words" instead of "water" gives the better sense; it is a warning against thoughtless talk (cf. 10:19; 17:27).

22 The word גֵּהָה (*gēhâ,* "healing, health"; NIV "medicine") is found in the MT. Some suggest emending it to "face," after the Arabic *jihatu*, or to גְּוִיָּה (*gᵉwîyâ,* "body"), as in the Syriac and Targum. The Hebrew, although a *hapax legomenon*, makes good sense in the verse.

D. The Speech of Fools versus the Speech of the Wise (18:1 – 21)

1 An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends;
he defies all sound judgment.

2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding

but delights in airing his own opinions.

3 When wickedness comes, so does contempt,
and with shame comes disgrace.

4 The words of a man's mouth are deep waters,
but the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook.

5 It is not good to be partial to the wicked
or to deprive the innocent of justice.

6 A fool's lips bring him strife,
and his mouth invites a beating.

7 A fool's mouth is his undoing,
and his lips are a snare to his soul.

8 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man's inmost parts.

9 One who is slack in his work
is brother to one who destroys.

10 The name of the LORD is a strong tower;
the righ teous run to it and are safe.

11 The wealth of the rich is their fortified city;
they imagine it an unscalable wall.

12 Before his downfall a man's heart is proud,
but humility comes before honor.

13 He who answers before listening —
that is his folly and his shame.

14 A man's spirit sustains him in sickness,
but a crushed spirit who can bear?

15 The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge;
the ears of the wise seek it out.

16 A gift opens the way for the giver
and ushers him into the presence of the great.

17 The first to present his case seems right,
till another comes forward and questions him.

18 Casting the lot settles disputes
and keeps strong opponents apart.

19 An offended brother is more unyielding than a fortified city,
and disputes are like the barred gates of a citadel.

20 From the fruit of his mouth a man's stomach is filled;
with the harvest from his lips he is satisfi ed.

21 The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.

COMMENTARY

1 *Character traits, antisocial.* An antisocial person is self-centered and unreasonable. This verse does not describe someone who is merely unfriendly or unsociable but one who is an enemy of society;its message is a warning against being a schismatic (Toy, 354). The Mishnah uses this passage to teach the necessity of not separating from the community because people have responsibilities as social beings (*m.* *Abot* 2:4).

The first line of the verse is difficult and complicated by a textual problem. Instead of reading “the one who separates himself seeks his own desires [*ta*ᵃ*wâ*; ‘selfish ends,’ NIV],” Frankenberg follows the LXX and reads, “seeks his own occasion” (*tō*ᵃ*nâ*), viz., “his own pretext” (cited by Toy, 354). The change seems unnecessary to the point of the proverb, differing only in the reason behind the separation. Lot, for example, chose the best land out of his desires (Ge 13:11).The proverb also describes the antisocial person as one who contends against all sound judgment. The verb *yitgallāᶜ* (“defies,”from *gālaᶜ*) means “burst out in contention” (lit.,“snarl, show the teeth”). He is indeed opposed to society and its decisions (see also Pr 17:14; 20:3).

2 *Instruction, rejected for opinion.* A fool prefers to give his opinion rather than acquire wisdom.Kidner, 127, says, “Closed mind, open mouth.” By means of antithetical parallelism, we learn what the “fool” (*kesîl*) does and does not do. He “finds no pleasure in understanding” (a tapeinosis; the opposite is the point — he detests understanding).Instead of gaining “understanding” (*tebûnâ*), he loves telling what is on his mind (*bᵉhitgallôt libbô*; “delights in airing his own opinions,” NIV; the verb *gālâ*means “to uncover, reveal, betray”; see 20:19; Ps 98:2). McKane, 515 – 16, observes that this kind of person is in love with his own ideas and enjoys spewing them out. This kind of person asks questions to show how clever he is, not to learn.

3 *Sin, its effect.* Contempt and disgrace come with wickedness. This verse displays step parallelism: wickedness (see Note) leads to “contempt” (*bûz*), and “shame” (*qālôn*, parallel to contempt) leads to “reproach” or “disgrace” (*h.erpâ*). The point is that punishment for wickedness comes naturally from the community. The disgrace, for example, would be the critical rebukes of the community against the wicked person. Of course, communities may not do this. Plaut, 195, notes, “Many a country club welcomes members whose contempt for

the community and its needs should make them social outcasts." See Malachi 2:9, where the Lord made the wicked priests base and contemptible before the people.

4 *Speech, profound.* The words of the wise are an inexhaustible supply of blessing and counsel. The question in this verse is whether v.4b is an antithesis to v.4a or a continuation. Normally a *waw* would begin an antithetical clause; the structure and the ideas suggest that the second part continues the idea of the first half. The metaphors in the verse normally describe the wise (see 10:11; 13:14; 16:22), and so that is its meaning (though v.4a only says "man"). The figure of "deep waters" suggests either the idea of an inexhaustible supply of words or deep, profound words.The figures of "fountain of wisdom" (see Note) and "bubbling brook" describe the speech of the wise as a continuous source of refreshing and beneficial ideas. Consequently the idea of profound fits better.

5 *Injustice, denounced* . It is reprehensible to pervert justice. The second line complements the thesis presented in the first line. The image in the first part, "lifting up the face," means showing partiality in judgments (cf. Dt 10:17; Mal 2:9). The predicate "not good" is an understatement (tapeinosis);it is reprehensible, vile, and wrong. The second clause may illustrate this crime: *lᵉhaṭṭôt* signifies "to turn aside," i.e., to turn people from their rights ("deprive," NIV; cf. 17:26; 28:21).

6 *Speech that invites trouble.* Foolish people get themselves into trouble by what they say. The second line, almost identical in thought to the first, parallels the result ("beating") with the cause ("strife"). The speech of the fool (*kesîl*) brings him into (legal? — the term is *rîb*) controversies; and since he is wrong, he is punished. The "beating" is probably physical, given either by a father or by society (for *makᵃlumôt*see 19:25; Ps 141:5).

7 *Speech, consequences of.* What a fool says can ruin him.This proverb continues the point of v.6. What a fool says is a "snare"(*môqēš*) to his life. Calamity and misfortune can come to the person whose speech makes known his lack of wisdom.

8 *Speech, gossip.* People delight in listening to gossip. This sad observation, developed in synthetic parallelism, simply affirms the common trait of human

nature. The words of the “gossip” (*nir-* alt="wt.png" src="D:/eBookstudio/OUTPUT/0310234980_content/wt.png" inline="1" /> are like “choice morsels” (the word is related to a verb meaning “to swallow greedily”). When such tasty bits are taken into the innermost being, they stimulate the desire for more. Whybray, 105, summarizes, “There is a flaw in human nature that assures slander will be listened to.”

9 *Laziness, its effect.* Laziness is destructive.The lines form a comparison to express that the lazy person and the destructive person are equally detrimental to society.The first is “slack” (*mitrappeh*) in his work;the other is called *baʿal mašḥît* (“possessor [= dealer] in/of destruction”; “one who destroys,” NIV). The link between these two is the term “brother”; they belong to the same classification; they are of similar nature. For example, the one who is slack may look for shortcuts and may make things that fall apart.His destruction may be indirect and slow in coming, but it is just as problematic.

10 *Security, the name of the Lord*. The Lord is fully able to protect those who trust in him.The first line establishes this truth, and the second focuses on the trust of the righ teous.This is the only place in Proverbs where “the name of the LORD ” occurs; it signifies the attributes of God, here the power to protect (cf. Ex 34:5 – 7). The metaphor of “strong tower”(*migdal-ʿōz*) sets up the imagery of the second clause:“running” metaphorically describes a wholehearted trust in God’s protection (see Isa 40:31), and “safely on high” (*niśgāb*;“safe,” NIV), a military term, stresses the effect. Other Scriptures delineate how God protects his people in different circumstances.

11 *Security, wealth*. Wealthy people often assume that their wealth brings security. The imagery of safety (*niśgābâ*;“unscalable,” NIV) links this proverb to the preceding. Since security comes from God, this proverb simply reports an assumption without commenting on it. Any protection wealth may bring is limited; for, as Psalm 49 teaches, money cannot bring ultimate security. The first metaphor, the “fortified city,” suggests protection from outsiders and outside elements; the second, “unscalable wall,”expresses their thoughts about being invincible.

12 *Humility, its reward.* The way to honor is through humility (see also 11:2; 15:33; 16:18). The humility and exaltation of Jesus provides the classic example

of this truth (see Isa 52:13 – 53:12; Php 2:1 – 10). An antithesis makes the point: pride (*yig-bah*) in the heart is the way to downfall, but "humility" (ʿānāwâ) is the prelude to "honor" (kābôd).

13 *Speech, premature*. Speaking too hastily leads to shame. The formal parallelism completes the thought that premature answering is "folly" (ʾiwwe- and "shame" (*kelimmâ*). Poor listening reveals that the person has a low regard for what the other is saying or is too absorbed in self-importance. The Mishnah lists this as the second characteristic of the uncultured person (*m.* ʾ*Abot* 5:7). McKane, 515, adds, "It is impossible to speak to the point if the point has not been taken, and effective speaking is inseparable from high relevance and a sensitive regard for all views which are being expressed."

14 *Spirit, healthy.* A healthy spirit brings healing to the body. This is affirmed by contrasting a healthy spirit with a "crushed spirit" (rûaḥ nᵉkēʾâ); the healthy attitude sustains a person, but depression is unbearable. In physical sickness one can fall back on the will to live; but in depression the will to live may be gone, and there is no reserve for physical strength. The figure of a "crushed" spirit suggests a broken will, loss of vitality, despair, and emotional pain. Few things in the human experience are as difficult to cope with as a crushed spirit.

15 *Knowledge, sought.* Those who are wise eagerly search for knowledge. By paralleling "heart"and "ears," the verse stresses the full acquisition of knowledge: the ear of the wise listens to instruction, and the heart of the wise discerns what is heard to acquire knowledge. Note that it is the wise in Proverbs who continually seek knowledge. Kidner, 129, says, "Those who know most know best how little they know."

16 *Gifts, their influence*. One may gain influence through gifts. The poetry is synthetic: the gift opens the way and gives "entrance" (*yanh.ennû* ; "ushers,"NIV) to nobles. *Mattan*m ("gift") is more general than "bribe" (šōḥad, as in 17:8, 23). But it, too, has dangers (see 15:27; 21:14), for by offering such gifts one may learn how influential they are and start to make bribes. Here the proverb simply says that a gift can expedite matters but says nothing about bribing judges. See Genesis 43:11 and the appeasing gift for Joseph.

17 *Justice, cross-examination.* There must be cross-examination to settle legal

disputes. The proverb is a continuous sentence. The first half affirms that the one side in a dispute may seem right, but it must be challenged by the other (*ḥ*^{a}*qārô*, meaning “investigate”; “questions him,” NIV). The proverb reminds us that there are two sides in any dispute (legal, domestic, or religious) and that all sides in a dispute must be given a hearing.

18 *Disputes, divinely arbitrated.* Serious disputes may be resolved through divinely inspired arbitration. The assumption behind this saying is that providence played the determining role in the casting of lots (cf. 16:33). If both parties recognized this, the matter can be resolved, no matter how strong the “opponents” (*ʿ*^{a}*ṣûmîm*). Today God’s Word and spiritual leaders figure prominently in divine arbitration (1Co 6:1 – 8).

19 *Disputes, their effect* . Serious disputes create insurmountable barriers among friends. The Hebrew is difficult; it seems to say that “an offended brother is [more isolated] than a strong city, and disputes are like the barred gates of the city”; but see the textual variations (see Note). The proverb is talking about changing a friend into an enemy by abuse (McKane, 520). Kidner, 130, notes that these walls are easy to erect and hard to demolish.

20 *Speech, productive*. Productive speech is satisfying. The lines are synonymous; the “fruit of his mouth” and “the harvest from his lips” both express the idea of productive speech. Such speech is satisfying (*tiśbaʿ* [“is filled”] and *yiśbāʿ*[“is satisfied”] are used in the two lines). In Proverbs words can bring good or evil; “fruit” and “harvest” have good connotations, and so constructive and beneficial speech is in view here.

21 *Speech, consequences of.* What people say can lead to life or death; “those who love it will eat its fruit.” The referent of “it” must be “the tongue,”i.e., what the tongue says. So those who enjoy talking, i.e., indulging in it, must bear its fruit, whether good or bad. The lesson is to be warned, especially if you love to talk. The *Midrash* mentions this point, showing one way it can cause death: “The evil tongue slays three, the slanderer, the slandered, and the listener” (*Midr. Tehillim* 52:2; see further James G. Williams, “The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs,” *Semeia* 17 [1980]: 35 – 38).

NOTES

3 Many commentators (McKane, 521; Scott, 112; Toy, 355) change the text from רָשָׁע (*rāšāʿ*," "wicked")to רִשְׁעָ (*rāšāʿ*," "wickedness") to form a better parallel in the line: with wickedness comes contempt. But this emendation is not necessary. The MT's "wicked person" lines up better with the misanthrope in v. 1 and the fool in v.2.

4 For "the fountain of wisdom is a bubbling brook" the LXX has "a river and fountain of life spring forth," reading "life" instead of "wisdom." This may have come about because of the rare word for the "brook" or "rushing stream" and the influence of 10:11, but there is no good reason for the change. Furthermore, Waltke, 2:72, notes that because there is no "but" in the line, the verse does not form a contrast but a synthetic description of wisdom's speech.

19 The translation "more unyielding than a fortified city" takes the preposition *min* as a comparative *min* and assumes an ellipsis of something like *qāšeh*. The LXX may have confused the *mem* with a *kaph* and then developed a clear antithetical proverb here:"A brother helped [not offended] is like a stronghold, but disputes are like bars of a citadel." Accordingly the editors of *BHS* propose מוֹשִׁיעַ (*môšiaʿ*) or שׁוֹעַ (*šôaʿ*) instead of נִפְשָׁע (*nipšāʿ*, "offended"). This reading is followed by the Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate as well as the RSV. But since both lines use the comparison with a citadel (fortified/barred city), the antithesis seems problematic.

E. Concerning Wealth and Wisdom in Court and Home (18:22 – 19:23)

22 He who fi nds a wife fi nds what is good
and receives favor from the LORD.

23 A poor man pleads for mercy,
but a rich man answers harshly.

24 A man of many companions may come to ruin,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

19 :1 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless
than a fool whose lips are perverse.

2 It is not good to have zeal without knowledge,
nor to be hasty and miss the way.
3 A man’s own folly ruins his life,
yet his heart rages against the LORD.
4 Wealth brings many friends,
but a poor man’s friend deserts him.
5 A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who pours out lies will not go free.
6 Many curry favor with a ruler,
and everyone is the friend of a man who gives gifts.
7 A poor man is shunned by all his relatives —
how much more do his friends avoid him!
Though he pursues them with pleading,
they are nowhere to be found.
8 He who gets wisdom loves his own soul;
he who cherishes understanding prospers.
9 A false witness will not go unpunished,
and he who pours out lies will perish.
10 It is not fitting for a fool to live in luxury —
how much worse for a slave to rule over princes!
11 A man’s wisdom gives him patience;
it is to his glory to overlook an offense.
12 A king’s rage is like the roar of a lion,
but his favor is like dew on the grass.
13 A foolish son is his father’s ruin,
and a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping.
14 Houses and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the LORD.
15 Laziness brings on deep sleep,
and the shiftless man goes hungry.
16 He who obeys instructions guards his life,
but he who is contemptuous of his ways will die.
17 He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and he will reward him for what he has done.
18 Discipline your son, for in that there is hope;
do not be a willing party to his death.
19 A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty;
if you rescue him, you will have to do it again.
20 Listen to advice and accept instruction,
and in the end you will be wise.
21 Many are the plans in a man’s heart,
but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.
22 What a man desires is unfailing love;

better to be poor than a liar.

23 The fear of the LORD leads to life:
Then one rests content, untouched by trouble.

COMMENTARY

18:22 *Wife, a blessing.* A good marriage is a good gift from God. The parallelism is formal, the second line explaining the first: finding a mate is the sign of favor from God (see Note). Although it does not specify so, the verse clearly means a "good" wife.Proverbs 31:10 – 31 develops this idea more fully, whereas other passages lament a bad wife (e.g., 12:4;Ecc 7:26). Whoever finds a good wife — or, as it can be broadened, a good marriage — finds "good"(*t.ôb* , meaning "fortune, favor," not a "good thing").The background of the saying may be Genesis 2:18, which affirms that it was "not good for the man to be alone." The word "good" describes that which is pleasing to God, beneficial to life, and abundantly enjoyable.

23 *Speech, humble or harsh.* One's social status determines the tone of one's voice. The contrast is between the poor man and the rich man. The poor man "pleads for mercy" because he has no choice — he has to ask. The rich man, however, often speaks "harshly"; he has hardened himself against such appeals because of relentless demands.It is generally the way of the world.

24 *Friendship, loyal.* It is better to have one good, faithful friend than numerous unreliable ones.The first line of the contrast says, "A man of many friends ['companions,' NIV] comes to ruin." The Hebrew *lᵉhitrōʿēa‹* is difficult. It means "for being crushed" or "to be shattered," not "to show oneself friendly" (cf. KJV). The idea may be that there are friends to one's undoing (if we read *yēš,* "there is,"instead of ,*ʾîš,* "a man," with Toy, 366). If a person has friends who are unreliable, he may still come to ruin, especially if these nominal friends use him.The second line is clearer: "there is a friend [*ʾōhēb*] who sticks closer than a brother." This indeed is a rare treasure!

19:1 *Poverty, better than folly.* Personal integrity, even with poverty, is far better than foolish perversion. This proverb provides a contrast between two selected situations. One is poverty with integrity (*bᵉtummô;* "blameless," NIV), and the other is "perverse [speech]" (*ʿiqqēš,* "twisted") of a "fool" (*kesîl*). Some change

“fool” to “rich” to make a better parallel and to match 28:6, but the change is unnecessary. The verse teaches people to follow honesty, even if it leads to poverty (see also 18:23; 19:22).

2 *Zeal, without knowledge.* Ill-advised and thoughtless zeal leads to failure. The lines are loosely synonymous. In the first the word *nepeš* means “vitality, drive,” so it describes the eager “zeal” of a person. Without knowledge this will be unsuccessful (“not good”). Neither is there success for those who are “hasty” (*ʾāṣ bᵉraglayim,* lit., “hasty with the feet”) and “miss the way” (*ḥôṭēʾ;* see Jdg 20:16;Job 5:24). Kidner, 132, underscores “how negative is the achievement of the man who wants tangible and quick rewards”— he will miss the way. The passage reminds us that we must know the time and the direction for action, or zealous effort will be a futile activity.

3 *Character traits, blaming God.* Fools will try to blame God when they ruin their lives. The first line establishes the fact that it is a person’s “folly”(*ʾiwwelet*) that ruins his life; the second adds that he “rages” (*yizᶜap*) against God. The fool is not willing to accept failure as his own. Of course, to blame God is also folly. Sirach 27:25 says, “He who throws a stone into the air is throwing it on his own head.”

4 *Wealth, its effect.* People run after the wealthy.Like 18:23 – 24, this proverb simply makes the observation on the reality of life. It does so with a contrast between the rich and the poor; wealth adds many friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friends. People will run after the rich in the hope of gaining something, but they will avoid the poor out of fear that the poor might be trying to gain something from them.

5 *Speech, false witnesses.* The lines of this proverb are in synonymous parallelism; “false witness”is parallel to “pours out lies.” Such people will be punished.The saying is general, because sometimes a perjurer gets away with the crime. The Talmud affirms, “False witnesses are contemptible even to those who hire them” (*b. Sanh.* 29b; see also v.9;6:19; 14:5, 25).

6 *Friendship, influential.* People seek the friendship of influential people.The two ideas in this verse are loosely synonymous. The first uses the image of “stroking the face” (*yᶜḥallû pᶜnê*); this means “to mollify, to make the face soft, to curry favor”(NIV; cf. Ps 45:12). The second line introduces “gifts” again (*mattān*).

As with Proverbs 18:23 – 24, this proverb acknowledges the value of gifts in life, especially in business and politics.

7 *Poverty, its effect.* People avoid those who are poor. This verse is difficult; it has three parallel units, but the third is unclear. As the text stands in the MT, the first two lines are loosely synonymous: "A poor man is hated [śᵉnē'uhû; 'shunned,' NIV] by all his relatives — / how much more do his friends avoid him!" But the third line adds, "He pursues them [mᵉraddēp] with pleading [ᵉmārîm], / but they are nowhere to be found." The last line is open to various translations, none of which is completely satisfactory. Toy, 370, argues that it is probably the remnant of a lost couplet and thus hardly possible to restore the full meaning. The basic meaning of the passage is clear, however; the idea of "hate," in the sense of "reject," tells how superficial friends and relatives will abandon the poor man. The plight of Job captures such abandonment.

8 *Wisdom, profitable.* Those who choose wisdom will prosper. The lines are loosely synonymous: "gets wisdom [lit., 'a heart'] parallels "cherishes understanding," and "loves his own soul" (i.e., has regard for his own interests) parallels "prospers" (lit., "finds good"). Loving life states the cause, and finding good adds its effect. Toy, 371, notes that "intellectual insight (= clearness of thought, good sense) is profitable in this life, the moral as well as the physical life being probably included."

9 *Speech, perjury*. Those who bear false witness will be punished. This proverb is the same as v.5, except that the last line changes to the verb yō'bēd ("will perish").

10 *Character traits, inappropriate positions.* A servant who gains power is worse than a fool who obtains wealth. Two thoughts here present unbearable conditions, one being slightly worse than the other. The operative word is nā'weh —"It is *not fitting* [italics mine] for a fool to live in luxury." Of course, if the fool changed and earned it, that is one thing. But this verse is about a misfit. The second thought is a slave who takes command over princes (see 12:24; 17:2). In these reversals the fool will only make worse his bad qualities — boorishness, insensitivity, and lack of discipline — and the slave will become arrogant and cruel. Toy, 371, says, "Wealth and power befit only the wise and the free." For other unbearable things, see 11:22; 17:7;26:1; 30:21 – 23.

11 *Patience, its nature.* Patience is prudent and honorable. The first line declares that “prudence”or “wisdom” causes patience. This *śēkel*(GK 8507) is good sense; it makes the man even tempered.McKane, 530, says:

> The virtue which is indicated here is more than a forgiving temper; it includes also the ability to shrug off insults and the absence of a brooding hypersensitivity. It is the ability to deny to an adversary the pleasure of hearing a yelp of pain even when his words have inflicted a wound, of making large allowances for human frailties and keeping the lines of communication open. It contains elements of toughness and self-discipline; it is the capacity to stifle a hot, emotional rejoinder and to sleep on an insult.

This kind of person prudently delays expressing anger (*heʾᶜrîk ʾappô;* “gives him patience,” NIV) and passes over an offense. Patience like this is “his glory” (lit., “his honor,” signifying more the idea of beauty or adornment). Kidner, 133, explains that such patience “brings out here the glowing colours of a virtue which in practice may look drably unassertive.”

12 *Emotions, of a king.* A king has the power to terrify or to refresh. Through the use of two similes, the verse contrasts the king’s “rage” (*zaᶜap*) with his “pleasure” or “favor” (*rᵉṣônô*). The first simile, the roar of a lion, presents him at his most dangerous attitude (see 20:2; Am 3:4). But the second portrays him as benevolent. For similar teachings see Proverbs 16:14 – 15; 20:2; 28:15. For a picture of the ideal king, see 2 Samuel 23:3 – 4. This proverb advises the king’s subjects to use tact and the king to cultivate kindness.

13 *Family, its ruin.* Folly and strife destroy a home. There are two problems that bring chaos to a family. The first is a foolish son (lit., “son of a fool,”meaning a son who is a fool), and the second is a “quarrelsome wife” (*midyᶜnê ʾiššâ*). The foolish son brings “ruin” (*hawwōt*) to the father (cf. 10:1; 17:21, 25); the quarrelsome wife is merely annoying (cf.27:15 – 16).

14 *Family, prudent wife.* A prudent wife, unlike property, is God’s special gift. The verse contrasts wealth that can be inherited from a father with a “prudent” (*maśkālet*) wife who is from the Lord.The verse does not answer questions about unhappy marriages or bad wives; rather, it simply affirms that when a marriage turns out well, one should credit God (cf. 18:22; 31:10 – 31).

15 *Laziness, its consequences*. Those who are lazy waste time and lose money. These loosely synonymous clauses stress one basic point. “Laziness” (ʿaṣlâ) brings on a “deep sleep.” *Tardem*m *â* is used to describe complete inactivity (see Ge 2:21; Jn 1:5); here it probably signifies lethargy (Whybray, 110). This individual wastes time that is needed to provide for himself and his family. Parallel is the “shiftless man”(rᵉmîyâ) who goes hungry. Once again the first line presents the cause (“deep sleep”) and the second the effect (“goes hungry”).

16 *Instruction, obedience to.* Obedience to instruction is a safeguard of life. Another antithetical parallelism stresses this point: obedience contrasts with contempt and life with death. The first line affirms that obedience to instruction safeguards life. This “instruction” (*mis*.*wâ*; GK 5184) may refer to the teaching of the sages or to God’s law. If it refers to God’s commandments, there is a stronger guarantee of safety for life.

The second line announces that the one who holds God’s ways in contempt will die (see Note).“His ways” could refer to the conduct of the individual or to the divine instruction (parallel to *mis*.*wâ*). If the latter is the case, then the punishment is more certain (even if through the courts). Toy, 374, offers the emendation from “his ways” to “his word” (as in 13:13), but unnecessarily so.

17 *Rewards for charity.* This proverb teaches that the Lord will reward those who give to the poor.The one who is gracious or “kind” (hôn̄ēn) to the poor is actually lending to the Lord, and the Lord will repay or “reward” (yᵉšallem) him for his deed.This promise of reward does not necessarily signify that he will get his money back; the rewards in Proverbs involve life and prosperity in general. In the NT such kindness is viewed as kindness to the Lord (Mt 25:40); see also the reward for following Jesus (19:27 – 28).

18 *Discipline, its benefit.* It is necessary to discipline (*ysr*) children to prevent their premature death.Proverbs here and elsewhere teaches that to refrain from discipline allows a child to grow up stupid or wicked and thereby possibly incur death as a result of bad behavior (Whybray, 110). The motivation for such discipline is that “there is hope” (*tiqwâ*), an excellent reason to keep at it. The clause in the second half literally reads, “Do not lift up your life to kill him”; that is, do not make the kind of decisions that will lead to his death (i.e., to allow him to go astray through neglect). The idea in *ysr* includes both chastisement and

instruction.

19 *Character traits, hot temper.* The second line of this proverb presents the consequence of the action of the first. Although the text is difficult (see Note), the point is that a hot-tempered person will be constantly in trouble. “Pay the penalty” suggests paying a fine, so the trouble could be legal.The second line warns that if you save this person from his legal troubles, you will have to do it again and again.Unless he changes, he will always need bailing out.

20 *Instruction, acceptance of.* By accepting advice and discipline, one becomes wise. This proverb is one continuous thought, the second half providing the purpose of the advice. The vocabulary reminds the reader of chs. 1 – 9: “Listen to advice [ʿēṣâ] and accept instruction [mûsār; lit., ‘discipline’].” This advice is in all probability the teachings of the sages that will make one wise. “In the end” there will be maturity from all the discipline, and there will be steadfast perseverance in the path of life.

21 *Sovereignty of God* . The success of our plans depends on God’s will. In the form of a contrast, the proverb teaches that only those plans that God approves will succeed (see 16:1, 9). People have many “plans,” but the Lord’s counsel or “purpose”will stand. Humans are diverse and uncertain; God is absolutely wise and sure, as Toy, 378, reminds us. *Midrash Mishlê* applies this passage to the accounts of Pharaoh, Absalom, and Haman.

22 *Character traits, loyalty.* Loyal love is better than wealth. According to the MT (see Note), what is desired is “unfailing love, loyalty” (*h.asdô*). *H.esed* (GK 2876) refers to the bond of loyal love between members of the covenant. It was expected that cov-enanters would be faithful in their words and deeds of kindness. The second line may present the logical inference from this;“a liar” is without *h.esed* entirely, and so poverty is better than that character trait. Kāzāb (“liar”) can be used in the sense of a mirage, so perhaps there is a closer antithesis between faithful love and false friend.

23 *Fear of the Lord, safety and contentment.* Piety brings a life of contentment and safety. The saying uses synthetic parallelism, the second part carrying the idea of life further. “Life” is probably a metonymy for all the blessings and prosperity in life. Its essential feature is “contentment” (śābēaʿ “content,” NIV) that

lodges without being visited by calamity or “trouble” (נָגַע). The vocabulary is vivid: “rests” is metaphorical for abide, and “untouched” means without any intervention to alter one’s destiny. When one lives a life of piety, the Lord provides a quality of life that cannot be disrupted by such evil.

NOTES

18:22 The LXX saw fit to embellish the line for the complete thought: “Whoever puts away a good wife puts away good, and whoever keeps an adulteress is foolish and ungodly.”

19:13 The LXX substitutes in v.13b the moralistic observation, “vows paid out of hire of a harlot are not pure.”

16 “Will die” represents the Qere reading יָמוּת (*yāmût*), which harmonizes best with Proverbs. The Kethiv, יוּמָת (*yûmāt*), a Hophal, is “will be put to death.” The Hophal is common in legal literature, but it never occurs in wisdom literature. A death sentence is not expected in a proverb (Waltke, 2:91).

19 There are many renderings of this verse that make its true meaning elusive (see Toy, 376 – 77). For example, the second clause could be: “If you save (your enemy), you will add (good to yourself)”; “If you save (your son by chastisement), you may continue (chastisement and so educate him)”; etc. However, as Toy says, all such translational attempts must supply a good deal of interpretation.

22 The MT has תַּאֲוַת (*taʾᵃwat*, “desire, lust”) and yields, “What is desired in a man is loyalty.” The LXX has καρπός (*karpos*, “fruit,” probably from תְּבוּאַת [*tᵉbûʾat*], “produce”). It reads,“The fruit of man is mercy.”“Desire” is the preferable reading in this couplet, which is an attempt to inspire loyal love.

F. Fools and Punishment (19:24 – 20:11)

24 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he will not even bring it back to his mouth!
25 Flog a mocker, and the simple will learn prudence;
rebuke a discerning man, and he will gain knowledge.
26 He who robs his father and drives out his mother
is a son who brings shame and disgrace.

27 Stop listening to instruction, my son,
and you will stray from the words of knowledge.
28 A corrupt witness mocks at justice,
and the mouth of the wicked gulps down evil.
29 Penalties are prepared for mockers,
and beatings for the backs of fools.
20:1 Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler;
whoever is led astray by them is not wise.
2 A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion;
he who angers him forfeits his life.
3 It is to a man's honor to avoid strife,
but every fool is quick to quarrel.
4 A sluggard does not plow in season;
so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing.
5 The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters,
but a man of understanding draws them out.
6 Many a man claims to have unfailing love,
but a faithful man who can find?
7 The righteous man leads a blameless life;
blessed are his children after him.
8 When a king sits on his throne to judge,
he winnows out all evil with his eyes.
9 Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure;
I am clean and without sin"?
10 Differing weights and differing measures —
the LORD detests them both.
11 Even a child is known by his actions,
by whether his conduct is pure and right.

COMMENTARY

24 *Laziness, its nature.* Some people are too lazy to eat. This humorous portrayal is certainly an exaggeration. It probably was meant more widely for anyone who starts a project but lacks the energy or desire to complete it (Whybray, 111). The sluggard "buries" (*tāman*, perhaps a cleverly chosen metaphor) his hand in the dish and is too lazy to pull it out — even to feed himself! (See also 26:15.)

25 *Discipline, its effect.* Discipline affects people differently. The antithetical proverb shows the different ways discipline works. Three types of people are

noted here: the “mocker” (*lēṣ*) with a closed mind, the “simple” or simpleton (*petî*) with an empty mind, and the “discerning” (*nābôn*) with an open mind (Kidner, 135). The simpleton learns by observing punishment given to the scoffer.Although the punishment will have no effect on the scoffer, it should still be given, for the *petî* will learn what the *les*m. does not (McKane, 525 – 26).The discerning person, however, will learn from verbal rebuke, even if it is painful truth. This is the more rational way. The contrast is caught in a wordplay in the *Midrash*: “For the wise a hint [*remez*], for the fool a fist [*kûrmêzā*]” (*Midr. Mishlê* 22:6).

26 *Family, mistreatment of parents.* Anyone who abuses one’s parents is a disgrace. The saying portrays this ingrate as one who “robs” his father and “drives out” his mother. Father/mother may be taken as a poetic stereotypical word pair rather than as two ideas separating what is done to the father and then to the mother (see 10:1; 17:21; 23:24). The proverb may have in mind the son who wishes to take over his father’s lands prematurely.

27 *Discipline, its rejection.* Rejecting discipline leads to disobedience. The verse includes an admonition and its motivation (a result). The admonition uses irony (it is not a conditional clause): “Stop listening to instruction, my son.” Of course it means, “Do not cease” to do so. The result of ceasing to listen is that the son will stray from the words of knowledge.

28 *Justice, corrupt witnesses.* Corrupt witnesses are a mockery to justice. The portrayal of the wicked witnesses in this proverb is arranged in loose synonymous parallelism. The wicked are first described as *ʿēd bᵉlîyyaʿal. Bᵉlîyyaʿal* (GK 1175) does not mean “worthless” but wicked; they are witnesses who wilfully distort the facts (“corrupt,” NIV). Such activity certainly “mocks” (*yālîṣ*, from *lîs*,. “to scorn”) justice.

The second line says that the mouth of the wicked “gulps down evil” (*yᵉballaʿ-ʾāwen*). The verb “gulps down, swallows” does not seem to fit the line very well. Some have emended it to *yab-bîa*< (“gushes”; cf. *BHS* margin). Driver (cited by McKane, 529), on the basis of the Arabic *balag*m*a*, reads “enunciates,” which makes a fine parallel for the idea of false witnesses. However the last verb is translated, the proverb clearly decries wilfully corrupting justice through false witnessing.

29 *Retribution, its certainty.* Fools will be punished. The lines are almost identical. *šᵉpāṯîm* (lit.,“judgments”) is a metonymy and may be rendered “penalties.” This parallels “beatings” closely and makes the emendation to *šᵉpāṯîm* (“rods”) unnecessary (cf. *BHS* margin).

20:1 *Drink, its effects.* The use of alcohol can lead to foolish behavior. The formal parallelism shows first the effects of intoxication and then makes an evaluation. The drinks are wine and beer, made from grapes and grains (see Lev 10:9; Dt 14:26; Isa 28:7).The terms “wine” and “beer” may be metonymies for those who drink them, or they may be personifications. In either case the point is the conduct of the inebriated person — mocking (*lēṣ*). and brawling (*hōmeh*).The excessive use of intoxicants excites the drinker to boisterous behavior and aggressive and belligerent attitudes; it confuses the senses so that he is out of control.Whoever overimbibes is unwise; it just is not sensible to drink to excess (Toy, 382).

Moreover, given the ease with which one may make a habit of drinking too much, it is wise to avoid alcohol entirely. In the OT the use of alcohol was not prohibited; in fact, it was regularly used at festivals and celebrations. But intoxication was considered out of bounds for a member of the covenantal community (see 23:20 – 21, 29 – 35; 31:4 – 7).

2 *Emotions, of a king.* It is unsafe to provoke the anger of a king. The verse begins with a comparison and then offers an explanation.The “wrath” (*ʿêmat*) of a king is compared to a lion’s roar, indicating imminent judgment. Anyone who angers a king will “forfeit” (*hôṭēʾ*; lit.,“miss” or “sin against”) his life.The verb *mitʿabbᵉrô* is problematic. The Hebrew form suggests “is angry with,” but the LXX more appropriately has “angers”; the word has also been taken to mean “vent anger against” (see Note). The simple idea is that one would do well to stay away from any angry person, especially a king who cannot be treated like other men (Whybray, 113; see also 16:14; 19:12).

3 *Conduct, avoiding strife.* Honorable people find ways to avoid strife. A contrast is presented here between avoiding “strife” (*rîb*) and jumping at a chance for a “quarrel” (*yitgallāʿ*, which includes the idea of snarling like a dog). The former is the way of honor and dignity; the latter, the manner of a “fool” (*ʾᵉwîl* here). One cannot avoid strife entirely but should avoid every unnecessary confrontation.As

McKane, 537, says, the honorable person stops short of undignified and unedifying wrangling; it is this person who has the capacity of preserving a working relationship with even the most difficult people (see also 17:14, 28; 18:2).

4 *Laziness, its results.* A farmer who is too lazy to plant at the right time will find no harvest. The parallel lines present the cause and the effect. The first line describes the lazy man or "sluggard" (ʿāṣēl) who does not plant in the autumn (see Note). The right time for planting was the rainy season (see Ge 8:22). It was cold, wet, and unpleasant. Perhaps such discomfort was his excuse. The effect is that at harvest time, when the sluggard "looks" (yᵉšāʿal; lit., "asks"), there is "nothing." The verse suggests that he did plant but perhaps at the wrong time or halfheartedly (contrast Ps 126:5 – 6), since he actually looks for some harvest. It is also possible to take the verb yᵉšāʾalto mean that he begs others for a share of their income. This character is typical of all who want excellence without putting forth the effort.

5 *Discernment, motives.* Those who are wise can discern the motives of the heart. This saying is one continuous sentence, though it exhibits a bit of an antithesis. The counsel or purpose (ʿēṣâ) in the heart is first compared to "deep waters." This figure probably means that one's motives are difficult to "fathom"— it takes a counselor with "understanding" (tᵉbûnâ) to "draw them out." The line shows how important good counseling is.

Plaut, 209, notes that if we are not aware of our motivations, others who are wise may enable us to discover them. Of course, there is always the need for discernment as to how much should be dredged from within the heart. McKane, 536, takes a slightly different approach, interpreting the "deep waters"to mean profound ideas (as in 18:4). Accordingly, it would take the wise to use their skills of clarification and interpretation.

6 It is rare to find a truly faithful friend. A contrast is offered here between many who claim to have faithful love and the rarity of one who actually has it. Many people profess "love" (*h.esed*), but such professions are often hollow. The shift to ,ʾᵉmûnîm("faithful") in the second clause makes this clear and captures the truth — it is rare to find one on whom you can depend.

7 *Integrity, its heritage.* The integrity of parents will extend to the lives of their children.Two terms portray this integrity — *ṣaddîq* and *tom*m . *S*.*ṣaddîq* (GK 7404) introduces the "righteous" man as a member of the believing community who strives to live according to God's standards, and *tom*m (GK 9448) shows his lifestyle to be "blameless." The line describes a parent who believes in the Lord and lives out the claims of his faith. Based on this description the second clause anticipates a blessing on the children. In God's economy the nature and actions of parents have an effect on children (Ex 20:4 – 6); here the parents' legacy is righteousness, and so the children reap the benefits (see 14:26).

8 *Justice, a king's discernment.* The righ teous king discerns right from wrong. The first clause lays the foundation and the second explains its outworking. The king in the ancient world was a judge, one whose counsel stood (see 2Sa 15:2 – 4; 1Ki 3:28; Ps 72:4; Isa 11:3 – 4). This proverb names justice (*dîn*;"to judge," NIV) as the basis of his administration and then uses the image of winnowing to show that he removes evil from his realm (see Ps 101). The verse could apply to any person in authority, but certainly the principle stands that a just government roots out the evils of society (Plaut, 210). Unfortunately, no government has ever lived up to this ideal.

9 *Conduct, sinlessness.* No one can say that he or she is pure in thought and deed. There is a development in thought with the second part of the proverb. Using a rhetorical question, the sage affirms that no one is sinless.To claim to have kept the heart "pure" (*zikkîtî*) is to say that all decisions and motives have been faultless; and to claim "I am clean" (*ta*. *h*m *artî*) is to say that moral perfection has been attained and one is therefore acceptable to God (*ṭāhartî*) "clean," in the Levitical laws of purification meaning "purged of all sin").

Many passages affirm the inevitability of our sinfulness (Ge 6:5; 1Ki 8:46; Ps 143:2), and Psalm 51:7 teaches that one can claim to be pure only if made pure by divine forgiveness. The sages here reflect the weakness of humanity. McKane, 548, says that one "can never be certain that his mind is pure and that he is without alloy of sin. Even when he has no good reason to believe otherwise and might draw such a conclusion in good faith, he cannot be certain that he is not self-deceived and has failed to plumb unsuspected depths of duplicity and perversion which Yahweh will take into account." So this proverb should bring us to personal humility and engender in us an understanding of the failures of others.

10 *Honesty, in business.* The Lord detests dishonesty in business. See v.23; 11:1, which are based on Deuteronomy 25:13 – 16.

11 *Righ teousness, displayed in actions.* Righ teous conduct reveals righteous character. The verse develops through synthetic parallelism the idea that a young child's character can be recognized by his actions.The *naʿar* in the first nine chapters referred to a young man, one whose character is formed in his early life; but here it refers to a younger boy.Parents can recognize certain traits in a child's conduct. If it is pure and upright, they can cultivate this; if it is not, they must try to develop it through teaching, disciplining, and personal example.

NOTES

19:27 Waltke, 2:92, observes that numerous alterations of the text have been proposed because of a failure to reckon with the proverb's sarcasm. The LXX rewords the line to read a participial form with the subject: "A son who ceases to attend to discipline of his father is likely to stray from words of knowledge."Others have weakened the translation by making it a conditional clause. But in the MT "my son" is a vocative followed by an imperative. McKane, 525, also argues for the MT, but on form-critical considerations.

29 Toy, 382, adopted the LXX reading of "scourges" instead of "penalties."The variant may have misread *šebeṭ* as *šōṭîm*.

20:2 McKane, 543 – 44, surveys several suggestions for מִתְעַבְּרוֹ (*mitʿabbʿrô*,' "he who angers him"); the LXX has "he who irritates [the king]"; *HALOT* has "he who loses his temper." Driver, connecting to the Arabic *ʿabara*, suggests "he that is negligent." The literal translation of the MT is "the one who makes him to show himself angry." There is no reason to resort to a cognate for the meaning when the Hebrew usage is clear enough.

4 The line says, "A sluggard does not plow from winter on." Toy, 384, rejects the translations of "winter"(RV) or the "cold" (Latin) because the point is laziness. The LXX reads "reproach," and this reading led to other changes in the line: "A sluggard when reproached is not ashamed; so also he who borrows grain in harvest."

6 The first line of this proverb is difficult. The line in the Hebrew begins with an emphatic nominal absolute, *rāb-ʾādām*, "As for many human beings . . ." (Waltke, 2:119). But then the Targum, Syriac, and Vulgate make the verb passive: "many men are called merciful." This would require a different pointing of the verb. Greenstone, 213, paraphrases the sense of the verse as, "Most men meet people who will do them occasional kindnesses."

G. Speech and Business (20:12 – 19)

12 Ears that hear and eyes that see —
the LORD has made them both.
13 Do not love sleep or you will grow poor;
stay awake and you will have food to spare.
14 “It’s no good, it’s no good!” says the buyer;
then off he goes and boasts about his purchase.
15 Gold there is, and rubies in abundance,
but lips that speak knowledge are a rare jewel.
16 Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger;
hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.
17 Food gained by fraud tastes sweet to a man,
but he ends up with a mouth full of gravel.
18 Make plans by seeking advice;
if you wage war, obtain guidance.
19 A gossip betrays a confidence;
so avoid a man who talks too much.

COMMENTARY

12 *Human nature, God’s creation.* The Lord has prepared people with the capacity to see and hear.The statement “ears that hear and eyes that see” refers to the two basic senses, though Toy, 386, thinks they represent all the God-given faculties. Certainly Scripture affirms their God-givenness (see Ex 4:11).By usage “hear” also means “obey” (see 1Sa 15:22;Pr 15:31; 25:12) and “see” also means “perceive, understand” (Isa 6:9 – 10).The verse not only credits the Lord with creating these senses but also reminds all people of their spiritual use in God’s service.

13 *Diligence, rewarded.* Diligence leads to prosperity. The verse is set in antithetical parallelism, the ideas of loving sleep and staying awake being contrasted, as well as their results of growing poor and being satisfied. Just as sleep can be used for slothfulness, so opening the eyes and staying awake can represent vigorous, active conduct. The second line uses two imperatives to stress the point: “stay awake . . . and [in order that you may] be satisfied” (“you will have food to spare,” NIV; see also 6:9 – 11; 19:15).

14 *Honesty, in business.* Some people falsely appraise a deal to gain a bargain.

This humorous but realistic point may be looked at in several ways. It presents a buyer who complains about how bad the deal is for him: “It’s no good, it’s no good” (*raʿ raʿ*; lit., “bad, bad”) and then goes away bragging about it. This may simply reflect normal procedure in a world where haggling for prices was common, but it may also be a warning to the inexperienced on how things are done and perhaps evaluates it as a questionable business practice. Shrewdness is one thing, but deceitful misrepresentation in the deal in order to buy under value becomes unethical.

15 *Speech, wise words.* It is rare to find someone who speaks knowledgeably. The verse is normally taken as antithetical parallelism,“gold” and “rubies” being contrasted with “lips that speak knowledge.”Toy, 388, however, arranges it as follows: “store of gold and wealth of corals and precious vessels — all are wise lips.” “Lips that speak knowledge” should be taken to mean “lips that impart knowledge,” viz.,wise speech.

16 *Obligations, fulfilled.* People should be held to their obligations. Two synonymous lines teach that a person who foolishly becomes responsible for another person’s debts should be made to keep his word.Taking the garment was the way of holding someone responsible to pay debts. The person for whom this “one” took responsibility is called “a stranger” (*zār*/*nokrîyâ*; see Note). The reference may be to other members of society in general.Dahood, 359 – 66, tries to argue that the cloak was given in pledge for a harlot, so here two crimes are in view: taking a cloak and going to a wayward woman (*nokrîyâ*; see also Snijders, 85 – 86).

17 *Dishonesty, its effects.* Good things acquired dishonestly will not bring satisfaction. The before and after scenes are presented in the two lines. “Food gained by fraud” means anything that is obtained through dishonest means; the image of “food” harmonizes with “sweet” (*ʿārēb*) in the initial response.The imagery is advanced in the second line: “he ends up with a mouth full of gravel” (a mass of small particles; see Job 20:14 – 15; La 3:16). One thinks immediately of the bitterness after Adam’s and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit (Ge 3), but this verse applies to anything wrongfully acquired.

18 *Plans, sound advice.* Effective plans incorporate sound advice. This verse is written as an injunction; it presents a continuous idea of first making plans and then waging a war. Sound “advice” (*ʿēṣâ*) and “guidance” (*taḥbulôt*) are indispensable

to the success of the mission.There have been many attempts to offer figurative interpretations of “war,” such as life’s struggles, litigation, or even evil inclinations (Rashi); but there is no reason or justification for this — it likely describes preparation for going to war, and in that there is wisdom in the consensus of leaders (see 24:6).

19 *Speech, gossip.* It is dangerous to associate with a gossip. The first line pictures the gossip as one who goes about revealing secrets, and the second line warns against associating with the person who talks too much. If a person is willing to talk to you about others, he will be willing to talk to others about you. McKane, 537, observes that these people are not necessarily malicious; they just lack discernment and are too garrulous. The less contact one has with a gossip, the better off one will be.

NOTE

16 The text involves a Kethiv-Qere reading. The Kethiv and the Vulgate have *nokrîm*, “foreigners” or “other men,” but the Qere and the Targum have *nokr îyâ*, “foreign woman” or “other man’s wife” (as in 27:13).The parallelism suggests that “stranger” is the correct reading, though theories have been presented with regard to the Masoretic correction to the idea of the wayward woman (NIV). Plaut, 211, moderately says that willful foolishness must be paid for, especially when it involves another man’s wife. In support of the Kethiv, however, Waltke, 2:139, suggests that the original form was *nokrî-m* with enclitic *mem*, a form that was not understood by the Masoretes.

H. Justice through the King (20:20 – 28)

20 If a man curses his father or mother,
his lamp will be snuffed out in pitch darkness.
21 An inheritance quickly gained at the beginning
will not be blessed at the end.
22 Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!”
Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.
23 The LORD detests differing weights,
and dishonest scales do not please him.

24 A man's steps are directed by the LORD.
How then can anyone understand his own way?
25 It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly
and only later to consider his vows.
26 A wise king winnows out the wicked;
he drives the threshing wheel over them.
27 The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man;
it searches out his inmost being.
28 Love and faithfulness keep a king safe;
through love his throne is made secure.

COMMENTARY

20 *Conduct, cursing parents.* Whoever curses his parents will be destroyed. Under the law (Ex 21:17;Lev 20:9; Dt 27:16), whoever cursed his parents was cursed with death. That judgment seems to be caught poetically in this single-sentence proverb.The topic is cursing (*qālal,* "to treat lightly, contemptuously"; GK 7838) parents, which, as Plaut, 212, reminds us, can be done in a number of ways, including denying and disparaging one's origin and background. The punishment is that "his lamp will be snuffed out," and he will be left in pitch darkness.The lamp is metaphorical for the life; for the lamp to go out means death (see 13:9) and possibly also removal of posterity (see Whybray, 115). In practice this curse may have been a social punishment only, i.e., the curser of parents being considered by others as dead (see Toy, 390).

21 *Prosperity, sudden but unsatisfying.* Sudden prosperity may not prove satisfying. The statement that prosperity gained suddenly will not be blessed in the end seems general. The implication is that what is "quickly gained" is either unlawful or unrighteous. The verb describes a hurried or hastened activity; perhaps a wayward son seizes the inheritance quickly (cf. Lk 15:12) or even drives out his parents (cf. Pr 19:26). In either case divine justice is at work — this enterprise "will not be blessed" (*lō' t'bōrāk*); rather than prosper, it will probably be wasted.

22 *Retribution, God's work.* Leave retribution to the Lord; let him bring about a just deliverance. The verse uses two imperatives to make the point; there is a slight antithesis between the two since one is negative ("Do not say") and the other positive ("Wait"). The righteous should not take vengeance on evil, for

only God can repay evil justly (cf. Ro 12:19 – 20). The response of the righteous must be to "wait" (*qāwāh*) on the Lord; this waiting involves belief in and reliance on God.The work of the Lord here focuses on the positive side — he is a deliverer (*yāšaʿ*) rather than an avenger, although to deliver the righteous involves judgment on the wicked. The spirit of the verse is caught in the Talmud in *b. Gittin 7a*: "Do not even ask him to inflict punishment on them."

23 *Honesty, in business.* The Lord detests dishonesty in business (see v.10; 11:1).

24 *Providence, divine.* God's control of our lives is beyond human comprehension. This proverb contains an affirmation and then a rhetorical question based on it: the "steps of a mighty man [*miṣʿadê-gāber*;'a man's steps,' NIV] are from the LORD"; how, then, can anyone discern or "understand" (*yābîn*) his way?How can anyone delude himself into thinking that he does not need the Lord when even a strong man's activities are divinely prepared (see, e.g., Ge 50:20; see also Pr 3:6 for the proper advice in view of this truth). McKane, 546 – 47, says: "No man can walk with enlightened assurance along the path of life by reason of a well-cultivated nicety of judgment and power of intellectual penetration. He is dependent at every step of the way on Yahweh, and without his light on his path his journey is deprived of safe guidance and enlightened purposiveness."

25 *Speech, rash vows.* Do not get caught in a rash vow. This single-sentence warning about making a rash vow addresses a common problem. Dedicating rashly (lit., declaring something sacred, as in Mk 7:11) is considered a "trap" (*môqēš*) because it can lead the person into financial difficulties. (Leviticus 27 explains that Israelites could buy themselves out of rash vows, but doing so was expensive.) Whybray, 116, broadens the warning to the avoidance of all unconsidered action. After making a vow, one must consider how to fulfill it. Too many people will make promises under the inspiration of the hour only later to realize that they have strapped themselves; they then try to go back on their word.

26 *Justice, removing wickedness.* A wise king purges his kingdom of the wicked. Using loosely synonymous parallelism, the sage draws on the image of winnowing to explain how the king removes evil from his empire.The metaphor

implies that the king can identify and rightly judge evildoers. The figure of driving the wheel over them represents a threshing process; the sharp iron wheels of the threshing cart easily served the purpose (cf. Isa 28:27 – 28).So this image also expresses the king's discrimination and ability to destroy evil from his domain (see also D. Winton Thomas, "Proverbs 20:26," *JTS* 15 [1964]: 155 – 56).

27 *Conscience, searching motives.* God provides everyone with a spirit that can evaluate actions and motives. The Hebrew literally says that the "breath" (*nišmat* ; "spirit," NIV) is the lamp of the Lord, though the NIV interprets it differently and supplies "searches" to v.27a from v.27b (though cf.NIV margin). The *nºšāmâ* (GK 5972) is that inner spiritual part of human life that was inbreathed at creation (Ge 2:7) and that constitutes humans as spiritual beings with moral, intellectual, and spiritual capacities. This spiritual nature includes the capacity to know and please God — it serves as the functioning conscience (the metaphor of "lamp").

This point is further developed in the second part; the searching makes it possible for people to know themselves. If one's spiritual life is functioning properly (i.e., yielded to God through salvation and controlled by his Word [Heb 4:12]), then there should be increasingly less self-deception or indifference to righteousness.

28 *Stability, in government.* Faithful covenant-love brings stability in society. The parallel ideas stress the security of the king's administration. The first line uses "love and faithfulness [lit., 'truth']" two terms that often form a hendiadys to express reliable love. *H¢esed* (GK 2876) is singled out of this couplet to form the parallel idea that the throne is secure.

These are covenantal terms. In the Davidic covenant (cf. 2Sa 7:11 – 16) God promised not to take his covenant-love (*h.esed*) from the king (cf. v.15) but to make his house stable (v.16). The two ideas are reiterated in Psalm 89:19 – 37, which expresses the covenant in poetry. It is the Lord and his faithfulness to his covenant that ultimately makes the empire secure; but the enjoyment of divine protection requires the king to rule with loyalty to the covenant.

I. Righ teousness and Justice (20:29 – 21:31)

29 The glory of young men is their strength,
gray hair the splendor of the old.
30 Blows and wounds cleanse away evil,
and beatings purge the inmost being.
21:1 The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD
he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.
2 All a man’s ways seem right to him,
but the LORD weighs the heart.
3 To do what is right and just
is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifi ce.
4 Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp of the wicked, are sin!
5 The plans of the diligent lead to profit
as surely as haste leads to poverty.
6 A fortune made by a lying tongue
is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare.
7 The violence of the wicked will drag them away,
for they refuse to do what is right.
8 The way of the guilty is devious,
but the conduct of the innocent is upright.
9 Better to live on a corner of the roof
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
10 The wicked man craves evil;
his neighbor gets no mercy from him.
11 When a mocker is punished, the simple gain wisdom;
when a wise man is instructed, he gets knowledge.
12 The Righteous One takes note of the house of the wicked
and brings the wicked to ruin.
13 If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor,
he too will cry out and not be answered.
14 A gift given in secret soothes anger,
and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifi es great wrath.
15 When justice is done, it brings joy to the righteous
but terror to evildoers.
16 A man who strays from the path of understanding
comes to rest in the company of the dead.
17 He who loves pleasure will become poor;
whoever loves wine and oil will never be rich.
18 The wicked become a ransom for the righteous,
and the unfaithful for the upright.

19 Better to live in a desert
than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.
20 In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil,
but a foolish man devours all he has.
21 He who pursues righteousness and love
finds life,prosperity and honor.
22 A wise man attacks the city of the mighty
and pulls down the stronghold in which they trust.
23 He who guards his mouth and his tongue
keeps himself from calamity.
24 The proud and arrogant man —“Mocker” is his name;
he behaves with overweening pride.
25 The sluggard’s craving will be the death of him,
because his hands refuse to work.
26 All day long he craves for more,
but the righteous give without sparing.
27 The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable —
how much more so when brought with evil intent!
28 A false witness will perish,
and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever.
29 A wicked man puts up a bold front,
but an upright man gives thought to his ways.
30 There is no wisdom, no insight,
no plan that can succeed against the LORD.
31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle,
but victory rests with the LORD.

COMMENTARY

29 *Character traits, strength and honor.* Both youth and old people have their glory. This observation reminds us that there are different commendations in life. For young men it is strength; for old men it is gray hair. This verse must be taken in the context of ancient Israel and not modern civilization, which often has little respect for the elderly. “Gray hair”symbolizes everything valuable about age: dignity, wisdom, honor, experience. At the very least one can say that since the elderly have survived, they must know something. At the most, they were the sages and wise elders of the people.

30 *Discipline, spiritual value.* Physical punishment may prove spiritually

valuable. Loosely synonymous, the clauses focus on corporeal punishment: “blows and wounds”//“beatings,” which “cleanse” (*tamrîq* , “rub away”) the soul of evil. Other proverbs have explained that certain people will never learn from such discipline, but in general this saying is true. Kid-ner, 141, says that where the conscience is slow to work (see v.27), this intervention may be necessary.He then reminds us of the bruising and stripes of the Suffering Servant, through which we are healed — an interesting turn of the sentiment here (Isa 53:5).

21:1 *Sovereignty of God.* A king’s decisions are controlled by God. The verse uses synthetic parallelism to develop the point. The first line affirms that the decisions (“heart”) of the king are under the Lord’s control (“in the hand”), and the second explains that God directs the king as he pleases.What clarifies the second line is the simile that the heart is “like a watercourse.” As a farmer channels the water where he wants and regulates its flow, so does the Lord with the king. No human ruler is supreme; to put it another way, the Lord is truly the King of kings. Scripture offers many examples of the truth of this proverb (Ezr 7:21; Isa 10:6 – 7;41:2 – 4; Da 2:21; Jn 19:11).

2 *Knowledge, divine.* The Lord evaluates our motives and not merely our actions. The verse, in antithetical parallelism, reiterates the point that we think we know ourselves; but the Lord knows our hearts, and his knowledge is evaluative (see also 16:2).

3 *Righteousness, its priority.* The Lord requires righteousness before religious service. This single sentence affirms that to do what is “right” (*ṣ ᵉdāqā*) and “just” (*mišpāṭ*). is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. The theme appears elsewhere (15:8; 21:29; 1Sa 15:22; Ps 40:6 – 8; Isa 1:11 – 17; et al.). It does not teach that ritual acts of worship are to be avoided; rather, it stresses that religious acts are valueless without righteous living.

4 *Character traits, pride.* Arrogant pride is sin.The verse is one continuous sentence, but the Hebrew is difficult. The MT reads, “Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the tillage of the wicked [*nir rᵉšāʿîm*] is sin [*ḥaṭṭāʾṭ*].” The meaning of the line seems clear enough, but the relationship of the clauses needs explanation. The problem is *nir* (“tillage”), which indicates that the product of the wicked is sin. McKane, 559, explains that the wicked cannot be cultivated; they are not amenable to educational discipline. But the difficulty remains: Are pride and

arrogance the products of the wicked? Even if one accepts the reading *nēr* (“lamp”), based on the LXX and the Aramaic and forming a nice contrast with 20:27 — though here the lamp is that of the wicked — there is still no clear connection in the verse.Toy, 399, suggests that the recovery of the text or its meaning seems impossible. In general we may say that the verse portrays pride as sin.

5 *Prosperity, patient planning.* Patience and planning lead to prosperity. By antithetical parallelism the verse exhorts industriousness. On the one hand, the “plans of the diligent” lead to profit; but on the other, “haste” leads to poverty. Toy, 399, thinks that the contrast between the diligent and hasty is not precise and suggests changing hasty to “slothful.” To make such a change, however, levels out the line to what McKane, 550, calls a pedestrian antithesis: the text contrasts calculated expeditiousness and unproductive haste. The text here warns about the danger of hasty shortcuts (see also 10:4; 28:20).

6 *Prosperity, by fraud.* A fortune gained by fraudulent means will be a fleeting treasure. Here again the Hebrew lines are difficult. The subject, expressed in the first part, is clear — it concerns a “fortune” made by a “lying” tongue. Two ideas comprise the predi-cate: “fleeting vapor” and “deadly snare.” The *hebel* *niddāp*m is more properly a “driven vapor” or “driven vanity”; it is as though the treasure disappears into thin air (Greenstone, 223). The “deadly snare” (lit.,“snares of death”) is derived from a change based on the LXX, for whose translators the Hebrew’s “seekers of death” seemed meaningless (see Note;see also Ps 18:5). The point, then, is that ill-gotten gain is a fleeting pleasure and a crime for which punishment is prepared.

7 *Retribution, just.* The wicked will be destroyed in their own devices. The sentence affirms this truth and then explains it. It is the “violence” (*šōd*) of the wicked that destroys them — it “drags them away,” probably to more sin, but ultimately to their punishment. But they are not passive victims of their crimes or circumstances, for “they refuse” to do justice. In the final analysis they can blame only themselves, for they choose to persist in evil rather than do what is right.

8 *Righteousness, revealed in works.* Righ teous behavior reveals righteous character. The antithetical clause asserts that it is also true that sinful acts betray

the wicked. The first line is difficult: “The way of the guilty [*ʾîš wāzār*] is devious.” Since *wāzār* occurs only here, it has received much attention. The idea of “guilty” is drawn from an Arabic cognate meaning “bear a burden” and so “sin laden”or “guilty.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 185) prefers the idea that “a man crooked of way is false [*zār*].” Toy, 400, adopts the idea of “proud.” Whether they are here described as guilty, false, or proud, the point is that the men described are devious.

Another way to analyze the line is to take *zar* m to mean “strange” or “stranger,” yielding, “The way of a man and a stranger is perverse.” But this reading forms no satisfactory contrast to v.8b. Another suggestion is “the way of (usual) man is changeable and strange, but the pure fellow leads a straight and even course” (Greenstone, 244). The second line is clear:“The conduct of the innocent is upright.” This is the antithesis of the deviousness of the wicked.

9 *Family, peaceful relationships.* Simplicity with peace is better than prosperity with strife. The line displays formal parallelism framed as one of the “better” sayings. The situation presented is sharing a house with a quarrelsome wife. The *bêt ḥāber*(lit., “house of company”) has received numerous interpretations (see the discussion in McKane, 554).According to this verse it would be better to live on the corner of the roof.The reference is probably to a little guest room built on the roof (see 1Ki 17:19;2Ki 4:10). It would be cramped and lonely — but peaceful in avoiding strife. The LXX removes all reference to a quarrelsome wife in favor of the idea of injustice in a common house.

10 *Character traits, wicked.* The wicked pursue evil and not mercy (see also 4:16; 10:23; 12:10; Isa 1:16 – 17).The person who lives to satisfy his craving for evil thinks only of himself. McKane, 556, observes that since humanity consists of reaching out to help others, “the man who cannot transcend his own self-assertiveness is in a prison and is dehumanized.” It is the propensity for evil that constitutes him as “wicked.”

11 *Discipline, its effect.* How mature one is determines how easily one will learn. The contrast is between the wise and the simple; the former learns by instruction, the latter by example.The wise person gains knowledge through “instruction,” which not only causes him to know but also gives insight into the issues of life. The wise person never stops learning. By contrast the “mocker” (*lēṣ*)

is unteach-able. Nevertheless he should be punished, because the “simple” (*petî*) will “gain wisdom” through seeing his punishment (see also 19:25).

12 *Judgment, its certainty.* Righteous ness will be satisfied when the wicked are punished. There are two different ways that this proverb can be taken.The easiest interpretation is to take *s.addîq* to refer to God, “the Righteous One.” God observes the house of the wicked and then hurls them to ruin (see 22:12; Toy, 402; Plaut, 220; Kidner, 143). But Proverbs does not refer to God in this way. The other interpretation takes *s.addîq* to refer to a “righteous man” (see NIV margin), presumably a judge or ruler, who, although he may be kindly disposed to the family of the wicked, is obliged to condemn him (Greenstone, 225).

13 *Character traits, unmerciful.* Those who show no mercy will not obtain mercy. Measure for measure justice is expressed by this cause-and-effect statement.The one who shuts his ears from the cry of the poor (i.e., refuses to help) will not be listened to when he cries out for help. So talionic justice is meted out for the omission of a commandment as well as for evil acts. See Luke 16:19 – 31 for an example.

14 *Injustice, bribery.* Bribes can effectively pacify an angry person. The two clauses are synonymous;the first uses the more neutral word *mattān* (“gift”)and the second the word *šōḥad*(“bribe”). Kidner, 143, notes that their parallelism in the proverb underscores how hard it often is to discern the difference. The verse does not condemn or condone; it merely observes the effectiveness of the practice. Although the verb “soothes” (*yikpeh*) is satisfactory, various commentators attempt to emend it to forms such as *y‘kappēr* (“covers”) or *y‘kabbeh* (“extinguishes”; see *BHS*). The point of the verse is clear without the change. The idea of the gift given in secret influenced the interpretation of the verse in the Talmud as a righteous act of charity (see *b. B. Bat. 9b*: “Whoever does this in secret is greater than Moses our teacher”).

15 *Justice, its effects.* How people respond to justice reveals their character. The occasion —“When justice is done” — can refer to a legal decision or to doing right in general. The point is that people who are law-abiding citizens are pleased with justice; those who are not are terrified by it, tend to ridicule it, and try to get around it in some way. *M‘hittâ*means “terror,” although some

commentators prefer to change it to “dismay” to make a better parallel with *śimḥâ* (“joy”). But the idea of “terror” heightens the contrast (Toy, 404); the wicked may be shaken into reality when justice is carried out.

16 *Wisdom, its importance.* Those who abandon the way of wisdom inevitably ruin their lives. The verse is a single sentence with the second part providing the predicate. The subject matter is one who wanders away from the “path of understanding” or prudence (*haśkēl*), i.e., one who does not live according to the knowledge, discipline, and insight of wisdom. Such a person “comes to rest” in the “company of the shades” (*qᵉhal rᵉpā᾽îm*; “dead,” NIV).The verb “rest” (*nûah*., GK 5663) does not carry with it the comforting idea of repose but merely that of “dwell,” for to rest among the “shades” is to be numbered among the dead. Physical death is again presented as the punishment for folly, which is sin. Plaut, 221, remarks, “Errant man will destroy himself before his time”; he will follow the broad way that leads to destruction and find himself among the dead (Mt 7:13 – 14).

17 *Pleasure, its cost.* Living a life of self-indulgent pleasure leads to poverty. By two synonymous lines the sage makes his point that the unbridled love of the finest things of life is very costly. “Joy” (*śimḥâ*;“pleasure,” NIV; GK 8525) represents the effect of the good life; “wine and oil” represent the cause for joy (so the metonymies work together). “Oil”signifies the anointing that goes with the luxurious life (see Pss 23:5; 104:15; Am 6:6).There is nothing wrong with joy or with enjoying the finest things in life. The “love” that is here portrayed must be excessive or uncontrolled, because it brings one to poverty. Perhaps other responsibilities are being neglected or the people are trying to live above their means.

18 *Judgment, just.* Divine justice will be administered righteously. In what way are the wicked a “ransom” (*kōper*; GK 4111) for the righteous?“Ransom” normally refers to the price paid to free a prisoner. Whybray, 121, puts the verse in perspec-tive: If it means that the wicked obtain good things that should go to the righteous, it is then a despairing plea for justice (which would be unusual in Proverbs); but if it is taken to mean that the wicked suffers the evil he has prepared for the righteous, then it harmonizes with Proverbs (e.g., 11:8). The saying is either a general statement or an ideal that in calamity the righteous escape but the wicked perish in their stead (e.g., Haman in the book of Esther). We must think, as Toy, 406, puts it, that when God punishes a community it is

the bad, not the good, he is directing his anger against. Believers can have wholehearted trust in the justice of God (see Ge 18:23 – 25).

19 *Family, peaceful relations.* Being alone is preferable to enduring domestic strife. This verse reiterates the theme of v.9 (see also 25:24), with one change — "a desert," which would be sparsely settled and quiet. These verses surely advise one to be careful in choosing a marriage partner and then to be diligent in cultivating the proper graces to make the marriage enjoyable.

20 *Wisdom, its frugality.* With keen foresight and appropriate frugality, the wise prepare for the future. The verse makes the point by contrasting the wise and the fool (*kesîl*). In the wise person's house are "precious treasure and oil" (ʾôṣār neḥmād wāšemen; "choice food and oil," NIV), but the foolish man "devours it."The verse basically means that the wise gain wealth but the foolish squander it.

The mention of "oil" (*šemen*) is problematic.How can a fool devour oil? Toy, 406, suggests dropping "oil" from the verse on the basis of the LXX;but the LXX seems too free for any support: "precious treasure will rest on the mouth of the sage."McKane, 552, adopts the view that *šemen* should be repointed *šāmîm*after an Arabic word *tamīn*("expensive") and the line rendered "desirable and rare wealth." But this idea does not match the metaphor any better. McKane says further that the fool lets money run through his fingers and does not use it to create a material environment for gracious living.

21 *Righteousness, its rewards.* Virtue will be rewarded. In fact, the idea may be that virtue has its own rewards. "Righteousness" (ṣᵉdāqâ; GK 7407) and "love" (*h.esed*; GK 2876) depict the lifestyle of the faithful covenant believer who is pleasing to God and a blessing to others. Whoever pursues righteousness will be filled with "life, prosperity and honor." "Prosperity" is again (ṣᵉdāqâ; so there is a wordplay on the term, the first use giving the basic meaning of conduct that conforms to God's standard and the second the effect of such righteousness. The idea of the proverb is renewed in the words of Jesus: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Mt 5:6; see also 6:33).

22 *Wisdom, greater than strength.* It is more effective to use wisdom than to

rely on strength. This proverb uses a military scene to describe the superiority of wisdom; the lines are loosely synonymous. It tells how the wise can scale the walls of the city of the "mighty" (*gibbōrîm*) and pull down their trusted stronghold. In a war the victory is credited not so much to the infantry as to the tactician, the general who plans the attack. Brilliant strategy wins wars, even over apparently insuperable odds (see also 24:5 – 6; Ecc 9:13 – 16; 2Co 10:4, which explains that wisdom from above is necessary for spiritual victory).

23 *Speech, controlled.* People who control what they say are more likely to avoid trouble than those who speak freely.The verse is a continuous sentence offering the consequences of an action — guarding the mouth and the tongue. The "calamity" (*sārôt*) may refer to social and legal difficulties into which careless talk might bring someone (see 13:3; 18:21);therefore, one should say only what is true, helpful, pleasant, and kind and avoid what is false, destructive, painful, and damaging to others.

24 *Character traits, pride.* The two lines of v.24, loosely synonymous, portray the godless attitude and the scornful arrogance of the "mocker" (*lēṣ,* GK 4370). He is "proud" (*zēd,* GK 2294) and "arrogant"(*yāhîr,* 3400), acting with "overweening pride."Pride may refer to the refusal to submit to the Lord or describe the refusal to learn from wisdom (McKane, 551). While the latter may be in view here, the two are not unrelated.This verse describes the nature ("name") of the irreligious mocker as insolent and proud. He is a most unpleasant fellow, disliked even by his own family, as the Talmud observes (b. *ʿAbod. Zar.* 18b; *b. Sot.ah* 47b).

25 *Laziness, its outcome.* The lazy come to ruin because they desire the easy way out. The "sluggard's desire [*taʾăwat* 'craving,' NIV]" must be coupled with "his hands refuse to work" to understand the point. Living in a world of wishful thinking and not working will bring ruin (*temîtennû,* "will be the death of him," is probably used hyperbolically here). Plaut, 223, suggests that there may be more to this idea; the sluggard might set his goals too high, far out of reach, thus paralyzing himself and producing nothing. At any rate, the verse teaches that doing rather than desiring brings success.

26 *Generosity, evidence of righteous ness.* Generosity reveals righteous ness. This verse has been placed with the preceding because of the literary connection with "desire" — "he craves for more," but it provides an independent thought.

The verse contrasts the one who craves with the one who gives generously, here called “the righteous” person. Consider the contrast between Abram and Lot in Genesis 13; Lot chooses the most desirable land for himself, and Abram gives Lot his preference. To be generous in that way requires walking by faith and not by sight.

27 *Worship, unacceptable.* God abhors worship without righteous ness. The verse affirms that the “sacrifice” (*zebah* .) of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord and then intensifies the idea (“how much more”) by referring to “evil intent” (*zimmâ*) with the sacrifice. Hypocritical worship is bad enough; worship with evil intent is deplorable. God does not want acts of worship without repentance; but he certainly detests them from someone still bent on wickedness, who thinks a sacrifice will buy continued acceptance with God. In popular religion people soon came to think that sacrifices could be given for any offense and without genuine submission to God. This happens with all religious acts. But God first requires of the worshiper true repentance and resolution to live righ teously.

28 *Speech, true and false witnesses.* False witnesses will be discredited and destroyed. The verse in Hebrew is obscure, though it does apparently contrast true and false witnesses. The first line affirms that the “false witness will perish”; that is, either his testimony will be destroyed or he will be punished.

The second line literally says, “A man who listens shall speak forever.” “The man who listens”contrasts to the false witness of the preceding line and probably describes a witness who knows and understands what the truth is (Kidner, 146).The NIV, following cognates, sees a homonym meaning “perish” — thus the translation “will be destroyed forever” instead of “speak forever.” Toy, 411, expected an idea such as “will be established”to contrast with “will perish.” McKane’s suggestion, 556, probably fits the best: The truthful witness “will speak to the end” without being put down or refuted (in cross-examination).

29 *Righteous ness, its genuineness.* Those who are truly righ teous cultivate a consistent lifestyle that pleases God. Kidner, 149, summarizes the verse to say that a bold front is no substitute for sound principles. The verse contrasts the wicked person who puts up a “bold front” with the upright person who solidifies (*yākîn*, “gives thought”) righteous conduct. The image of the hardened face reflects

a hardened heart (Plaut, 224); it portrays one who holds in contempt the opinions and views of others (see Isa 48:4; Jer 5:3; Eze 3:7).

30 *Sovereignty of God.* Human "wisdom" (*ḥokmâ*), "insight" (*tebûnâ*), and "counsel" (*ʿēṣâ*; "plan," NIV) must be in conformity to God's will to be successful. The verse uses a single sentence to declare that if these qualities are in defiance of God, they cannot succeed; for human wisdom is nothing in comparison to the wisdom of God (Greenstone, 232; see Job 5:12 – 13; Isa 40:13 – 14).McKane, 558, reminds us that these qualities are the claims of the sages, who present themselves as the intellectual elite. Yet he adds: "But the sages do not in fact possess the prescience and control which are indicated by these high-sounding words;their vocabulary and claims make shipwreck on Yahweh, to whom alone the vocabulary which the wise men use of themselves and their intellectual powers really applies."

31 *Sovereignty of God.* Ultimate success comes from God and not from human efforts. The contrast here is between the plans and efforts for the battle ("the horse is made ready for the day of bat-tle") and the true acknowledgment of the source of victory ("the LORD"; see Pss 20:7; 33:17).

NOTES

20:30 This verse is difficult. The LXX has “blows and contusions fall on evil men, and stripes penetrate their inner beings”; the Latin has “the bruise of a wound cleanses away evil things.” Toy, 397, suggests adopting the LXX or emending the line to read, “Stripes cleanse the body, and blows the inward parts” or “cosmetics purify the body, and blows the soul.”

21:6 The MT’s מְבַקְשֵׁי־מָוֶת (*m^ebaqšê-māwet*, “seekers of death”) yields the translation, “a fleeting vapor for those who seek death.” The variant reading מוֹקְשֵׁי (*môqᵉšê*, “snares of ”) is supported by the LXX and the Latin. This reading does not make a more credible metaphor, and to adopt it one has to explain the loss of the letter *beth*. It is easier to interpret within the verse that the fortune is a deadly snare. But this reading argues against the variant. As Waltke, 2:160, says, one can more readily explain away the LXX’s “traps” as a facilitating reading because of the rare syntax of *m^ebaqšê* than explain away the more difficult text supported by the majority of manuscripts, as well as the Targum, Syriac, and Symmachus.

14 The LXX offers a moralizing interpretation not too closely tied to the MT: “He who withholds a gift stirs up violent wrath.”

J. Wealth and Moral Instruction (22:1 – 16)

1 A good name is more desirable than great riches;
to be esteemed is better than silver or gold.

2 Rich and poor have this in common:
The LORD is the Maker of them all.

3 A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge,
but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

4 Humility and the fear of the LORD
bring wealth and honor and life.

5 In the paths of the wicked lie thorns and snares,
but he who guards his soul stays far from them.

6 Train a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not turn from it.

7 The rich rule over the poor,
and the borrower is servant to the lender.
8 He who sows wickedness reaps trouble,
and the rod of his fury will be destroyed.
9 A generous man will himself be blessed,
for he shares his food with the poor.
10 Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife;
quarrels and insults are ended.
11 He who loves a pure heart and whose speech is gracious
will have the king for his friend.
12 The eyes of the LORD keep watch over knowledge,
but he frustrates the words of the unfaithful.
13 The sluggard says, “There is a lion outside!”
or,“I will be murdered in the streets!”
14 The mouth of an adulteress is a deep pit;
he who is under the LORD’s wrath will fall into it.
15 Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline will drive it far from him.
16 He who oppresses the poor to increase his wealth
and he who gives gifts to the rich — both come to poverty.

COMMENTARY

1 *Reputation, good.* A good reputation is more valuable than wealth. This verse is not disparaging wealth; it merely notes that a good name is worth more than silver or gold. The lines are synonymously parallel, “name” being matched by “to be esteemed.” In the first line the word “good” is understood. Only a good name would be desired, for it brings praise, influence, and prosperity. *Ḥēn ṭôb* in the second line means “good favor,” i.e., one well thought of, one who has engaging qualities.The point is that a good reputation excels other blessings in life (see *m.* *ʾAbot* 4:17). Kidner, 146, says that our proper joy is “not in the power we wield, but in the love in which we are held.”

2 *Sovereignty of God.* Regardless of status in life, all are equally God’s creation; the verse uses synthetic parallelism to make this point. Both the rich and the poor live side by side in this life (expressed by *nipgāšû*; “have this in common,” NIV), but they both are part of the order of God’s creation (McKane, 570). People often forget this truth and make value judgments; we do well to treat all people with respect, for God can as easily reduce the rich as raise the

poor.

3 *Wisdom, avoiding trouble.* Those who are shrewd avoid the dangers of life. The contrast is between the "prudent" (ʿārûm) and the naive or "simple"(pᵉtayîm).The prudent know where the dangers and pitfalls are in life; they are wary. They are the product of training in wisdom and discipline, for one of the purposes of Proverbs is to make the naive (*petî*) wary (ʿārûm; see 1:4). The simple person is unwary, uncritical, and credulous; he is not equipped to survive in this world and so blunders into trouble (McKane, 563).

This verse develops the contrast: the prudent avoid danger, but the naive do not see it and so they "suffer" for their blindness (ʿānaš, GK 6740; this word describes a fine in 17:26 and 19:19; here it is more general; see 27:12). The unspoken implication is, Get wisdom!

4 *Piety, its reward.* God will reward reverential piety. This verse simply lists two spiritual qualifications (humility and fear) and three rewards (wealth, honor, and life). The relationship between the clauses is expressed by ʿēqeb ("consequence, reward"; "bring,"NIV)."Humility" (ʿᵃnāwâ) is used here in the religious sense for piety and so fits well with "the fear of the LORD" (yirʾat yhwh). For the idea of life as the product of piety, see 21:21; for the reward, see 3:2, 16.

5 *Security, through wisdom.* Those who have the discipline of wisdom avoid life's dangers. The two parts of this verse are loosely antithetical. The first clause informs us that the "wicked" are on a path to death; the way is covered with "thorns and snares.""Thorns" (ṣinnîm) seems out of place; therefore, many emend the text to ṣammîm("traps"), making a better match — "traps and snares" (see Note). In contrast to the wicked is the one who guards his life and thus avoids the snares. This person is obviously the prudent one.

6 *Family, child training.* Proper training of a child will endure throughout his life. The parallelism is formal; the second clause provides the consequence of the first.The imperative is "train" (ḥᵃnōk, GK 2852); this verb includes the idea of "dedicate,"and so the training should be with purpose. The "child" (naʿar) presumably is in the youngest years, although the Talmud places him between sixteen and twenty-four. The NEB captures the point of early instruction: "Start a boy on the right road."

The right road is expressed by “in the way he should go” (*ʿal-pî darkô*). The way the verse has been translated shows that there is a standard of life to which one should go. Of course, a person must be young enough when change for the better is still possible. The consequence is that when he is old (*yazqîn*), he will not depart from it. Whybray, 125, notes that the sages were confident of the character-forming quality of their teaching.

In recent years it has become popular to interpret this verse to mean that the training should be according to the child’s way. The view is not new;over a thousand years ago Saadia suggested that one should train the child in accordance with his ability and potential. The wise parent will discern the natural bent of the individual child and train it accordingly. Kidner, 147, acknowledges that the wording implies respect for the child’s individuality but not his self-will; he reminds us that the emphasis is still on the parental duty of training. Training in accordance with a child’s natural bent may be a practical and useful idea, but it is not likely what this proverb has in mind.

In the book of Proverbs there are only two “ways” a child can go: the way of the wise and the righteous, or the way of the fool and the wicked.Moreover, it is difficult to explain why a natural bent needs training. Ralbag, in fact, offered a satirical interpretation: “Train the child according to his evil inclinations (let him have his will) and he will continue in his evil way throughout life” (cited in Greenstone, 234). Toy, 415, summarizes the ways that one might take “according to his way”:

> not exactly “in the path of industry and piety”(which would require *in the right way*), nor “according to the bodily and mental development of the child” (which does not agree with the second cl.), but “in accordance with the manner of life to which he is destined,” the implication being that the manner of life will not be morally bad.

McKane, 564, agrees that “according to his way”must mean the way he ought to go: “There is only one right way — the way of life — and the educational discipline which directs young men along this way is uniform.”

7 *Poverty, its effect.* Poverty makes people dependent on others. The parallel is synonymous. The verse simply states a fact that the poor or the borrowers

become subservient to the rich. The verse may be referring to the apparently common practice of Israelites selling themselves into slavery to pay off debts (see Ex 21:2 – 7). It is not appreciably different from the modern debtor who is working to pay off bills.

8 *Punishment, certain.* God will surely destroy the power of the wicked. The first clause declares the truth that the one who sows "wickedness" (ʿawlâ) reaps "trouble" (ʾāwen). The second clause appears to carry this idea further to reveal how it works: "The rod of his fury [šēbeṭ ʿebrātô] will be destroyed" (see Note). The symbol of the rod here represents his power for doing evil. One would conclude that in reaping trouble this fellow will no longer be able to unleash his fury. The LXX adds, "A man who is cheerful and a giver God blesses"— an idea expressed in 2 Corinthians 9:7.

9 *Generosity, its nature.* There is a reward for being generous to the poor. The generous person is here ṭôb-ʿayin("a good eye"), in contrast to the "evil eye," which is stingy and covetous. This person has a benevolent disposition, keen social conscience, and concern for the poor. The irony is that because he is not the prisoner of his selfish desires, he achieves the highest degree of self-fulfillment (McKane, 569).

10 *Strife, its source.* The mocker causes quarrels and strife. Written in loosely synonymous parallelism, this verse advises us to expel the "mocker" (lēṣ). One can think of a heckler who is present only to disrupt a meeting; before serious discussions can begin, he will have to be removed.The LXX freely expresses that "when he sits in a council [*synedrio*]m, he insults everyone."The MT does not suggest that the setting is in a court of law, so there is probably no reference to the Sanhedrin.

11 *Speech, honest and graceful.* Honest and gracious speech will be highly respected. The syntax of this verse is not easy to understand. The text seems to say, "He who loves purity of heart, the grace of his lips the king is his friend." The simplest interpretation is that someone who is honest and gracious will be welcomed in the courts of the palace (see also 16:13).

12 *Sovereignty of God.* The Lord ensures that truth, not deception, succeeds. The lines are in antithetical parallelism, contrasting how God deals with truth

and error: He “frustrates” the words of the “traitor”(*bōgēd*; “unfaithful,” NIV), but he keeps “watch over knowledge.” The point is clear enough — the Lord acts to vindicate the truth. D. Winton Thomas suggests a change of meaning from “knowledge”to “lawsuit” based on an Arabic cognate (“A Note on דַּעַת in Proverbs 22:12,” *JTS* NS 14 [1963]:93 – 94). This suggestion is one possible solution to the difficulty that the abstract idea of “knowledge”is not used with the verb “watch” (*nāṣar*). Toy, 418, has, “The eyes of Yahweh are on the righteous,” but this change is too radical for the text.

13 *Laziness, its excuses.* The lazy person makes absurd excuses for not working. The verse humorously portrays the sluggard as not going out because he might be eaten by a lion in the streets (cf. 26:13).The LXX changes it to “murderers in the street” to form a better parallel, possibly because *nāṣaḥ* (. (“to murder,” GK 8357) is used only of humans in the Bible.**14** *Judgment, divine.* Divine judgment brings ruin on the adulterer. The topic is the “mouth of an adulteress,” perhaps a reference to her seductive speech (see 2:16 – 22; chs. 5; 7). It is described as a “deep pit” where the guilty fall under God’s judgment. The pit is like the hunter’s snare; it is difficult to escape. So to succumb to the adulteress — or to any such folly — is both a sin and its punishment.

15 *Discipline, parental.* Discipline will remove a child’s bent to folly. A general contrast first explains that “folly” (*ʾiwwelet*) is in the child and then instructs how to get rid of it — by “the rod of discipline.” Whybray, 125, suggests that this idea might be described as a doctrine of “original folly.”The child is morally immature; the training must suppress folly and develop potential (see also 13:24;23:13, 16; 29:15).

16 *Injustice, extortion, and bribery.* The punishment for extortion and bribery is poverty. The Hebrew is a little cryptic: “Oppressing the lowly, it is gain for him; he who gives to the rich, it is loss.” Perhaps both are to be seen as folly and resulting in poverty, the first being an immoral act (*ʿōšēq*, “oppresses”) that God will punish and the second being a waste of money. McKane, 572, says that “giving money to a person who is already rich is an example of squandermania.” Perhaps the verse is simply observing that it is easy to oppress the poor for gain, but it is a waste of money to try to buy a patron (Kidner, 149).

NOTES

5 The word צִנִּים (*ṣinnîm,*‘ “thorns”) is obscure. There is an apparent cognate צְנִינִים (*ṣᵉnînîm,* “thorns”)in Numbers 33:55 and Joshua 23:13. The idea of thorns in the way is also found in Proverbs 15:19. The LXX translated the word τρίβολοι (*triboloi,*‘, “prickly plants”) based on the verses in Joshua and Numbers.But that translation requires adding an “and.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 186) traced the word from an Arabic cognate *s.innu*, meaning “basket traps.” McKane, 565, also traces this possible development to support the change to “traps.”Waltke, 2:194, concludes that “trap/snares” is a safe guess that does not require emending the text. The construction involves an asyndetic apposition: “snares, bird traps.”

8 The LXX adds another verse here: “God blesses a cheerful and liberal man, but a man shall prove the vanity of his works.” The expression שֵׁבֶט עֶבְרָתוֹ (*šēbeṭ ʿebrātô*, “the rod of his fury”) has a variant in the LXX: “the punishment of his deeds.” Thus, Toy, 416, emends to *šeber* so that it reads, “the produce of his work.” But the Hebrew text is not obscure, and *šeber* does not actually mean “produce.” Although “rod of his fury” may not follow closely the imagery of v.8a, it is understandable in the verse.

11 The LXX missed the nominative absolute and then inserted “the Lord” from v.12 as the subject, thus yielding the translation, “The Lord loves the pure in heart, all who are blameless in their ways are acceptable to him.” The LXX’s reading does not fit v.11b. In fact, the LXX has little correspondence with the MT; nevertheless commentators use the LXX to attempt to reconstruct the verse.

V. THE SAYINGS OF THE WISE (22:17 – 24:34)

OVERVIEW

Here begins a new collection of sayings forming the fourth section of the

book. This collection is not like that of 1:1 – 9:18; here the introductory material is more personal than 1:1 – 7 and differs in style, showing great similarity to the Egyptian “Instruction of Amenemope” (see McKane, 369 – 74).

A. Thirty Precepts of the Sages (22:17 – 24:22)

1. Introductory Call to Attention (22:17 – 21)

17 Pay attention and listen to the sayings of the wise;
apply your heart to what I teach,
18 for it is pleasing when you keep them in your heart
and have all of them ready on your lips.
19 So that your trust may be in the LORD,
I teach you today, even you.
20 Have I not written thirty sayings for you,
sayings of counsel and knowledge,
21 teaching you true and reliable words,
so that you can give sound answers
to him who sent you?

17 – 21 In the introductory call to attention, the sage urges greater trust in the Lord and promises solid teachings that will prove reliable. This extended introduction reminds us that the wise sayings are not curiosity pieces; they are revelation, and revelation demands a response. The call is laid out with the exhortation to learn and pass on the teaching (v.17), followed by three motivations: (1) there will be a pleasing store of wisdom (v.18); (2) there will be deeper trust in the Lord — a distinctively Israelite aspect of wisdom literature (v.19); and (3) it will build reliability — he will grasp the truth (v.20) and see himself as a special envoy to keep wisdom in his heart and on his lips (v.21; Kidner, 149).

This introductory section has two striking connections with the “Instruction of Amenemope.”First, the purpose of “Amenemope” was to teach “how to return an answer to him who said it, and to direct a report to one who has sent him, in order to direct him to the ways of life” (introduction; 1:5 – 7). Likewise, our “Sayings of the Wise”are words of truth that will provide reliable answers to the sender. Whybray, 133, explains that court officials are entrusted with conveying messages and obtaining answers; the ability to discharge this important function

in a reliable manner is a test of character.

Second, the reference to “thirty” (šālîšîm; v.20) is significant, for “Amenemope” also had thirty chapters (*ANET* , 421 – 24). So this section of Proverbs is close in contents with the Egyptian work;but the proverbs here are not direct borrowings or mere imitations. Nonetheless the influence of the Egyptian work on this section is certainly there (see Simpson;Whybray, 132; Glendon E. Bryce, *A Legacy of Wisdom:The Egyptian Contribution to the Wisdom of Israel* [Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979];J. Ruffle, “The Teaching of Amenemope and Its Connection with the Book of Proverbs,” *TynBul* 28 [1977], 29 – 68; John A. Wilson, “Egyptian Instructions,” in *ANET*, 412 – 25; see also A. Cody, “Notes on Proverbs 22:21 and 22:23b,” *Bib* 61 [1980]:418 – 26).

According to this introductory paragraph, as Toy, 424 – 25, says, “the pupil is to devote himself to study, in order that his religious life may be firmly established, and that he may be able to give wise counsel to those who seek advice.”

2. The Thirty Sayings (22:22 – 24:22)

22 Do not exploit the poor because they are poor
and do not crush the needy in court,
23 for the LORD will take up their case
and will plunder those who plunder them.
24 Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man,
do not associate with one easily angered,
25 or you may learn his ways
and get yourself ensnared.
26 Do not be a man who strikes hands in pledge
or puts up security for debts;
27 if you lack the means to pay,
your very bed will be snatched from under you.
28 Do not move an ancient boundary stone
set up by your forefathers.
29 Do you see a man skilled in his work?
He will serve before kings;
he will not serve before obscure men.
23:1 When you sit to dine with a ruler,
note well what is before you,
2 and put a knife to your throat

if you are given to gluttony.
3 Do not crave his delicacies,
for that food is deceptive.
4 Do not wear yourself out to get rich;
have the wisdom to show restraint.
5 Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone,
for they will surely sprout wings
and fly off to the sky like an eagle.
6 Do not eat the food of a stingy man,
do not crave his delicacies;
7 for he is the kind of man
who is always thinking about the cost.
“Eat and drink,” he says to you,
but his heart is not with you.
8 You will vomit up the little you have eaten
and will have wasted your compliments.
9 Do not speak to a fool,
for he will scorn the wisdom of your words.
10 Do not move an ancient boundary stone
or encroach on the fi elds of the fatherless,
11 for their Defender is strong;
he will take up their case against you.
12 Apply your heart to instruction
and your ears to words of knowledge.
13 Do not withhold discipline from a child;
if you punish him with the rod, he will not die.
14 Punish him with the rod
and save his soul from death.
15 My son, if your heart is wise,
then my heart will be glad;
16 my inmost being will rejoice
when your lips speak what is right.
17 Do not let your heart envy sinners,
but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD.
18 There is surely a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.
19 Listen, my son, and be wise, and keep your heart on the right path.
20 Do not join those who drink too much wine
or gorge themselves on meat,
21 for drunkards and gluttons become poor,
and drowsiness clothes them in rags.
22 Listen to your father, who gave you life,
and do not despise your mother when she is old.

23 Buy the truth and do not sell it;
get wisdom, discipline and understanding.
24 The father of a righteous man has great joy;
he who has a wise son delights in him.
25 May your father and mother be glad;
may she who gave you birth rejoice!
26 My son, give me your heart
and let your eyes keep to my ways,
27 for a prostitute is a deep pit
and a wayward wife is a narrow well.
28 Like a bandit she lies in wait,
and multiplies the unfaithful among men.
29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow?
Who has strife? Who has complaints?
Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?
30 Those who linger over wine,
who go to sample bowls of mixed wine.
31 Do not gaze at wine when it is red,
when it sparkles in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!
32 In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.
33 Your eyes will see strange sights
and your mind imagine confusing things.
34 You will be like one sleeping on the high seas,
lying on top of the rigging.
35 “They hit me,” you will say, “but I’m not hurt!
They beat me, but I don’t feel it!
When will I wake up so I can find another drink?”
24:1 Do not envy wicked men,
do not desire their company;
2 for their hearts plot violence,
and their lips talk about making trouble.
3 By wisdom a house is built,
and through understanding it is established;
4 through knowledge its rooms are filled
with rare and beautiful treasures.
5 A wise man has great power,
and a man of knowledge increases strength;
6 for waging war you need guidance,
and for victory many advisers.
7 Wisdom is too high for a fool;
in the assembly at the gate he has nothing to say.

8 He who plots evil
will be known as a schemer.
9 The schemes of folly are sin,
and men detest a mocker.
10 If you falter in times of trouble,
how small is your strength!
11 Rescue those being led away to death;
hold back those staggering toward slaughter.
12 If you say, “But we knew nothing about this,”
does not he who weighs the heart perceive it?
Does not he who guards your life know it?
Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?
13 Eat honey, my son, for it is good;
honey from the comb is sweet to your taste.
14 Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul;
if you find it, there is a future hope for you,
and your hope will not be cut off.
15 Do not lie in wait like an outlaw against a righteous man’s house,
do not raid his dwelling place;
16 for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again,
but the wicked are brought down by calamity.
17 Do not gloat when your enemy falls;
when he stumbles, do not let your heart rejoice,
18 or the LORD will see and disapprove
and turn his wrath away from him.
19 Do not fret because of evil men
or be envious of the wicked,
20 for the evil man has no future hope,
and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out.
21 Fear the LORD and the king, my son,
and do not join with the rebellious,
22 for those two will send sudden destruction upon them,
and who knows what calamities they can bring?

COMMENTARY

22 – 23 *Saying 1: treatment of the poor.* This passage warns people not to oppress the poor, because the Lord avenges them (cf. “Amenemope,” ch. 2;4:4 – 5). The jussives ,*ʾal-tigzol* and *ʾal-tʿdakkēʾ* v.20) prohibit exploiting or crushing the poor. McKane, 377, observes that because the poor are defenseless, they can be robbed easily; this situation makes the crime contemptible but tempting as well.

The oppression pictured here may be in bounds legally, but it is out of bounds morally (e.g., similar to modern business ethics). The motivation is that the Lord will plead or “take up their case” and will turn the plundering back on the guilty. Here again the Lord is revealed as champion of the defenseless.

24 – 25 *Saying 2: dangerous associations.* The warning is to avoid associating with a hothead because his influence could prove fatal (cf. 1:10 – 19; 14:17, 29; 15:1; see “Amenemope,” ch. 9; 11:13 – 14).The “one easily angered” (*ʾîš ḥēmôt,* v.20) lit., “a man of heat” // *baʿal ʾāp,* v.20) “a hot-tempered man”) is denounced here primarily because such conduct is injurious, although the implication is that it is also morally wrong (Toy, 426).

26 – 27 *Saying 3: rash vows.* If people foolishly pledge what they have, they could lose it all (see 6:1 – 5; 11:15; 17:18; 20:16; there is no parallel in the Egyptian material). The risk is that if someone lacks the means to pay, his creditors may take his bed, i.e., his last possession (cf. our expressions “the shirt off his back” or “the kitchen sink”). “Bed”may be a metonymy for the garment that covers the bed (cf. Ex 22:26).

28 *Saying 4: respect for property.* The sage warns against appropriating someone else’s property (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 6; 7:12 – 13). Removing an “ancient boundary” (*gᵉbûl ʿôlām*) v.20) was always an issue; the general teaching is that ancient traditions, if right, were to be preserved. But violations were frequent. Kidner, 150, says, “No law will protect people when integrity is absent” (see Dt 19:14;27:17;1Ki 21:16 – 19; Isa 5:8; Hos 5:10).The boundaries were sacred because God owned the land and had given it to the ancestors as their inheritance; to extend one’s land at another’s expense was a major violation of covenant and oath. Of course, property disputes and wars ancient and modern arise because both sides can point to times when their ancestors owned the land.

29 *Saying 5: benefits of skill.* Skill earns recognition and reward of advancement (see also “Amenemope,” ch. 30; 27:16 – 17). The saying anticipates that a person “skilled” (*māhîr*) v.20) in his work will serve kings.The person might be a scribe or an official (Whybray, 134), like the keen-witted statesman in the “Words of Ahiqar” (see McKane, 380); but the description applies to all craftsmen.Kidner, 150, notes: “Anyone who puts his workmanship before his prospects towers above the thrusters and climbers of the adjacent

paragraphs.”Such will find the proper setting where his skill will be appreciated and not have to waste it on an ignoramus (Plaut, 235).

23:**1 – 3** *Saying 6: caution before rulers.*“Amenemope” (chapter 23; 23:13 – 18) also warns about getting too close and too familiar with a ruler — he probably has ulterior motives. Plaut, 237, reminds the reader that these sayings are set in the history and culture of ancient times; courtiers had to learn how to deal with all-powerful tyranny, how to survive while not losing their self esteem.

This passage warns against overindulging in the ruler’s food, because that could ruin one’s chances for advancement. The expression “put a knife to your throat” (v.2) means “to curb your appetite, control yourself ” (like “bite your tongue”; see Delitzsch, 2:104). The reason is that the ruler’s food may be “deceptive” (*kᵉzābîm*) v.20)— it is not what it seems. So the warning is not to indulge in his impressive feast; the ruler wants something from you or is observing you (Delitzsch, 2:105). The Mishnah (*m.* ,*ʾAbot* v.20)2:3) quotes Gamaliel as warning that a ruler only draws you into court for his purpose, but in your day of trouble he will not be there.

4 – 5 *Saying 7: fleeting wealth.* People should not wear themselves out trying to get rich, because riches disappear quickly. “Amenemope” (ch. 7; 9:10 – 11) says, “They have made themselves wings like geese and are flown away to the heavens” (cf.*ANET* , 9.10 – 10.5). In the ancient world the figure of a bird flying off symbolized fleeting wealth. It is therefore folly to be a slave to it (see also Lk 12:20; 1Ti 6:7 – 10). Besides, as *m.* ,*ʾAbot* v.20)2:8 warns, this behavior will only add to the anxiety.

6 – 8 *Saying 8: unpleasant hospitality.* It is a mistake to accept hospitality from a stingy person, for his lack of sincerity will make the evening unpleasant. The person considered here has an “evil eye” (*raʿ ʿāyin*; v.20) “a stingy man,” NIV; v.6). This miser (v.7; see 28:22) is ill-mannered and inhospitable; he is up to no good (contrast the “bountiful eye” in 22:9 [“generous man,” NIV]). Eating and drinking with him will be irritating and disgusting (see Note).Any unpleasant conversation attempted will be lost (though Toy, 430 – 31, connects “lose sweet words” [“wasted your compliments,” NIV] with v.9).

9 *Saying 9: wisdom wasted on a fool*. A “fool” (*kesîl*) despises wisdom, so it

is a waste of time to try to teach him. There is no specific connection to Egyptian literature, but the general concept is there that a fool rejects discipline and instruction, often scorning the teacher who tries to change him. Plaut, 239, suspects that “some hate the critic in direct proportion to the justification of the criticism.”

10 – 11 *Saying 10: respect property.* Once again the instruction warns against removing a boundary stone and encroaching on the property of the defenseless (v.10; see 22:22 – 23, 28).The motivation is that their “Defender” (gō’ālām) v.20) is strong and will plead their cause. The redeemer/avenger (gō’ēl; v.20) GK 1457) was usually a powerful relative who would champion the rights of the defenseless; but if there was no human *go* ,m*el*m, God would take up their cause (see Ge 48:16; Ex 6:6; Job 19:25; Isa 41 – 63).

12 *Saying 11: renewed call to attention.* The disciple is to apply his heart to discipline and listen carefully to knowledge. This introductory verse may have been added later, based on 22:17.

13 – 14 *Saying 11: necessity of discipline.* The sage instructs the continued use of “discipline” (mûsār, v.20) GK 4592), for the one punished will not die.“Ahiqar” 6:82 also says, “If I strike you my son, you will not die.” The idea is that discipline helps the child to live a full life; if he were to die (prema-turely), it would be a consequence of not being trained. In Proverbs such a death might be moral and social as well as physical.

15 – 16 *Saying 12: wise and joyful speech.* Children bring joy to their parents by showing that they make wise choices. The quatrain is arranged in a chiastic pattern, using “if your heart is wise” and “when your lips speak what is right” to bracket the verses. A wise heart is one that makes wise choices;the “right” (mêšārîm) v.20) speech refers to direct and honest speech, in which there is no discrepancy between the speech and the intentions. McKane, 387, summarizes: “[The] function of speech is then always to clarify and never to deceive”; to speak (mêšārîm) v.20)is to speak in contrast to deception that uses ambiguity to darken counsel.

17 – 18 *Saying 13: fear the Lord.* These lines advise us always to be zealous for the fear of the Lord rather than be envious of sinners. The contrast is between

right and wrong envy; the one is spiritual exercise and the other a disease. The difficulty, of course, is that the sinful world seems more attractive. Thus the motivation provided is that the future belongs to the righteous. Kidner, 152, remarks that the remedy for envying sinners is to look up(“fear the LORD” in v.17) and look ahead (there is a “future hope,” v.18).

19 *Renewed call to attention.* The disciple must listen, be wise, and keep his decisions right. For a fuller treatment, see comment on 4:25 – 27.

20 – 21 *Saying 14: poor associations.* If one associates with drunkards and gluttons, he will become poor. The “drunkard” and the “glutton” represent the epitome of the lack of discipline. Drunkenness and gluttony are used to measure a stubborn and rebellious son in the Mishnah (*m. Sanh.* 8). Plaut, 241 – 42, observes that excessive eating and drinking are usually symptoms of deeper problems; we usually focus more on the drinking because it is a dangerous social problem with far-reaching consequences.

22 *Saying 15: honoring parents.* Because of parents’ position and experience, their wise counsel should be heeded. The idea of honoring here takes on the precise nuance of listening to instructions (Toy, 436).

23 – 25 *Saying 16: wisdom’s estimation.* The instruction is to acquire truth and gain wisdom, discipline, and understanding — this is the life that pleases God and brings joy to parents. Getting truth means acquiring training in the truth, and gaining understanding means developing the perception and practical knowledge of the truth (Toy, 436).

26 – 28 *Saying 17: following advice.* It is imperative to follow the teacher’s warnings about temptation because Dame Folly is lurking. The teacher calls for the pupil to imitate him, to follow his ways (v.26), i.e., to shun the temptress. The passage portrays two types of harlots: unmarried (*zônâ*, “prostitute”) and married (*nokrîyâ*, “wayward wife”; v.27). In either case there is danger, for their way is a “pit,” the gateway to Sheol; those who enter are as good as dead.

But the danger is active;“like a bandit she lies in wait” (v.28; see 7:12) and multiplies the unfaithful among men. Dahood, 359 – 66, reinterprets *bôgedîm* (“a bandit,” NIV) to mean “garments,” saying that she collects garments in pledge

for her ser vice.The change is unnecessary; the line makes good sense meaning that her victims prove “unfaithful” to the law of God or that she is unfaithful to her husband repeatedly.

29 – 35 *Saying 18: excessive drinking.* One should avoid the temptation to excessive drinking, for it leads to trouble when the senses are dulled. The change of style shows that the sage could break into a vivid use of his imagination (Whybray, 138).M. E. Andrews (“Variety of Expression in Proverbs 23:29 – 35,” *VT* 28 [1978]: 102 – 3) charts the developing ideas here: v.29 is a riddle and v.30 its answer; instruction follows in v.31, with consequences described in v.32; the direct address continues in vv.33 – 34; and the conclusion is in the drunk’s own words (v.35).

The sage gives a vivid picture of the one who drinks too much: he raves on and on, picks quarrels and fights, poisons his system with alcohol, gets bloodshot eyes, loses control, is confused, is unable to speak clearly, imagines things, and is insensitive to pain. While alcoholism is a medical problem, it is also a moral problem because it involves choices and endangers other people.

24:1 – 2 *Saying 19: evil associations.* One should not envy or desire the company of evil people, for they are obsessed with violence (see also 1:10 – 19;3:31; 23:17). Kidner, 153, observes that a close view of sinners is a good antidote to envying them.

3 – 4 *Saying 20: practicality of wisdom.* The use of wisdom is essential for domestic enterprises. In 9:1 wisdom is personified as a woman who builds a house, but here the emphasis is primarily on the building — it is a sign of security and prosperity (Toy, 442). One could make a secondary application to building a family (cf. Ps 127). Plaut, 247, observes:“The replacement of book shelves by television sets and of the study by the ‘den’ in modern homes (regressing from human to bestial habitats!) is a sad commentary on our times.” It certainly is true that if it takes wisdom to build a house, it also takes wisdom to build a household.

5 – 6 *Saying 21: wisdom greater than strength* .Wise counsel is necessary for war. The point is that for victory strategy is more important than strength — but that strategy must be wise. See also 11:14; 20:18; 21:22.

7 *Saying 22: fools.* Fools cannot obtain wisdom. The text is difficult here (see Note). The verse portrays a fool out of his element. In a serious moment in the gathering of the community, he does not even open his mouth. Wisdom is beyond the ability of the "fool" (*'ewîl* v.20).

8 – 9 *Saying 23: disapproval of evil men.* The general public disapproves of a wicked person who plots evil things. The picture of the wicked person is graphic: he devises evil and is a schemer, a sinner, and a scorner (*lēṣ*. v.20) *Zimmâ* is "scheme"; elsewhere it describes outrageous and lewd schemes (see Lev 18:17; Jdg 20:6). Here the description "schemer" (*baʿal-mᵉzimmôt* v.20) portrays him as a cold, calculating, active person: "the fool is capable of intense mental activity (*mᵉzimmâ* v.20) but it adds up to sin" (McKane, 399). This type of person flouts all morality, and sooner or later the public will have had enough of him. The only way out for such wickedness is repentance and forgiveness.

10 *Saying 24: test of adversity.* How well one does under adverse conditions reveals how strong that person is. The verse uses a paronomasia to stress the connection: "If you falter in the times of trouble [*ṣārâ* v.20), / how small [*ṣ.ar*] is your strength!"You never know your strength until you are put into situations that demand much from you. Of course, a weak person will plead adverse situations or conditions in order to quit (Kidner, 154).

11 – 12 *Saying 25: preservation of life*. God holds people responsible for rescuing those who are in mortal danger. The use of "death" and "slaughter"seems strong in this passage; one might expect the verse to stress the need to rescue through teaching those who by their vice or imprudence are hastening toward destruction (see Toy, 445). The idea of "staggering" to the slaughter may need emendation to "at the point of " (G. R. Driver, "Problems in 'Proverbs,' " *ZAW* 50 [1932]: 146).

The references here may be general (i.e., to any who are in mortal danger) or specific (i.e., those convicted). If the latter is meant, the sage is saying not to abandon the convicted to prison, for they need all the help they can get (McKane, 401). The general application would include any who are in mortal danger, through disease, hunger, war; we cannot dodge responsibility, even by ignorance.

13 – 14 *Saying 26: future of wisdom.* One should develop wisdom because it has a profitable future.The proverb draws on the image of honey; its health-giving properties make a good analogy to wisdom. While the literal instruction is to eat and enjoy honey, the point is to know wisdom. (D. W.Thomas argues for "seek" instead of "know"; see "Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,"*JTS* 38 [1937]: 401.) The motivation is that wisdom will have a long future to it ("hope" — ,ʾaḥᵃrît v.20)and *tiqwâ*).

15 – 16 *Saying 27: treatment of the righteous.* It is futile and self-defeating to mistreat God's people, for they survive, whereas the wicked do not! The warning is against attacking the righteous; to attack them is to attack God and his program, and that will fail (see Mt 16:18). The consequence, and thus the motivation, is that if the righ teous suffer misfortune any number of times (= "seven times," v.16), they will rise again; for virtue triumphs in the end (Whybray, 140). Conversely, the wicked will not survive; without God they have no power to rise from misfortune. The point, then, is that ultimately the righteous will triumph and those who oppose them will stumble over their evil.

17 – 18 *Saying 28: misfortune of the enemy.* It is dishonoring to God for us to rejoice over the misfortune of our enemies. The prohibitions "Do not gloat" and "do not . . . rejoice" extend even to the inner satisfaction (the "heart") at their calamity; such people are still the image of God. The motivation for this instruction is the fear of the Lord's displeasure — God may even take pity on your enemy!

The point is a little complicated. It is the property of God to judge, and it is not to be taken lightly or personalized. God's judgment should strike a note of fear in the hearts of everyone (see Lev 19:17 – 18;Mt 5:44). So if we want God to continue his anger on our enemies (by implication, the wicked), we should not gloat at their punishment. The proverb refers to personal enemies; the imprecatory psalms, directed against the enemies of God and his program, address a different set of circumstances.

19 – 20 *Saying 29: envying the wicked.* It is foolish to envy the wicked, for they are doomed (see 3:31; 23:17 – 18; 24:1 – 2). Two jussives — "Do not fret" (ʾal-titḥar) v.20) and "do not be envious" (ʾal-tᶜqan- nēʾ) v.20) — form the warning. The

motivation is that the wicked have no “future hope” (ʾaḥᵃrît; v.20), or as Toy, 449, explains, there will be no good outcome for their lives. Their lives (“lamp”) will be suddenly “snuffed out.”

21 – 22 *Saying 30: fearing God and the king.* People should fear both God and the government, for both punish rebels. The positive instruction is followed by the warning “do not join” (ʾal-titᶜārāb; v.20) lit., “do not get mixed-up”) with “the rebellious” (*šônîm* ; lit., “people who change,” i.e., political agitators; see Note).Verse 21a is used in 1 Peter 2:17 and v.22 in Romans 13:4. The reward for living in peace under God in the world is that those who do so will escape the calamities that will fall on the rebellious.

NOTES

23:7 The LXX and Targum misunderstood the rare word *šāʿar;* v.20) the LXX rendered it as "hair" (as though *šāʿar;* v.20) and the Targum as "gate." The LXX has "eating and drinking (with him) is as if one should swallow a hair; do not introduce him to your company nor eat bread with him." The Hebrew *šāʿar;* v.20)has been taken in the sense of "calculated," literally "as he calculated in his soul." The slight change from *šāʿar;* v.20)to *šāʿar;* v.20) would give this picture of an irritating and sickening experience. "Amenemope" uses "blocking the throat" in the same saying (ch. 11; 14:7). But evidence from cognates indicates the verb means "to arrange" balances or thoughts. The description of one's arranging his thoughts harmonizes with the idea that he is a calculating person, or as the NIV has, is always thinking about the cost.

24:7 רָאמוֹת (*rāʾmôt,* v.20) "too high") would normally be "corals" — "Wisdom to the fool is corals," i.e., an unattainable treasure. With the slight change in the word to *rāmôt,* v.20) "high" is formed (so NIV).

21 D. W. Thomas ("The Root *šnh* = *šny* in Hebrew, II," *ZAW* 55 [1937]: 174 – 76) connects *šônîm* to Arabic *saniya*, "high, exalted in rank." The proverb would then be a warning against joining those who exalt themselves, perhaps against the king. The word שׂוֹנִים (*śônîm,* v.20) "rebellious") may simply refer to the nobility. But it has been given various translations. The idea of change is preserved in the RV, which Toy, 450, says may include the idea of political agitators. The Syriac and Targum have "fools"; the Latin has "distractors"; the LXX has "do not disobey either of them," referring to God and the king in the first line. Accordingly, the ruin predicted in the next line is the ruin that God and the king can inflict (see a full discussion in Toy, 450).

B. Further Sayings of the Wise (24:23 – 34)

23 These also are sayings of the wise:
To show partiality in judging is not good:

24 Whoever says to the guilty, "You are innocent"—
peoples will curse him and nations denounce him.

25 But it will go well with those who convict the guilty,
and rich blessing will come upon them.
26 An honest answer
is like a kiss on the lips.
27 Finish your outdoor work
and get your fields ready;
after that, build your house.
28 Do not testify against your neighbor without cause,
or use your lips to deceive.
29 Do not say, “I’ll do to him as he has done to me;
I’ll pay that man back for what he did.”
30 I went past the field of the sluggard,
past the vineyard of the man who lacks judgment;
31 thorns had come up everywhere,
the ground was covered with weeds,
and the stone wall was in ruins.
32 I applied my heart to what I observed
and learned a lesson from what I saw:
33 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest —
34 and poverty will come on you like a bandit
and scarcity like an armed man.

COMMENTARY

23 – 25 *Partiality in judgment.* These verses contain several ethical teachings for judges: “To show partiality” is not good (v.23), calling the “guilty” (*nāšāʿ*, v.20) lit., “the wicked”) “innocent”(*s.addîq* , lit., “righteous”) will bring strong denunciation (v.24); but “those who convict the guilty”will be richly blessed (v.25). All these sayings set the standard that righteous ness and evil be clearly distinguished by the courts (see 18:5; Lev 19:15;Dt 16:19).

26 *Truthfulness.* A truthful answer is the mark of friendship.The symbol of specifically kissing on the lips is mentioned only here in the Bible. Herodotus (*History* 1.134) shows that among the Persians this act was a sign of true friendship. The metaphor signifies that friendship is characterized by truth (cf.the NT practice of greeting with a “holy kiss”; Ro 16:16; 1Co 16:20; et al.).

27 *Financial stability.* A man should be financially secure before starting a

family. Before entering marriage one should have a well-ordered life.Why-bray, 153, thinks that the meaning is not restricted to marriage but in general teaches us to keep first things first.

28 *False witness.* This saying may be directed to the false accuser, for a friend says the right thing.There should be solid reasons before one ever goes to testify against a friend.

29 *Vengeance.* Rather than give in to the old spirit of vengeance, one should avoid retaliation (the same teaching is used in 20:22; Mt 5:43 – 45;Ro 12:9). Hillel said, “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you” (*b. Šabb.* v.20)31a).

30 – 34 *Laziness.* The teacher makes several observations about the state of the sluggard that reveal that his continued laziness will result in poverty. The reminiscence used here may be a literary device to draw a fictional but characteristically true picture of the lazy person (see also 6:6 – 11).

VI. PROVERBS OF SOLOMON COLLECTED BY HEZEKIAH (25:1 – 29:27)

A. Introduction (25:1)

1 These are more proverbs of Solomon,
copled by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah:

1 This section of the book contains additional proverbs attributed to Solomon that were collected by the men of King Hezekiah (715 – 687 BC).These scribes or scholars “copied out” the sayings, i.e., transcribed them from one book to another.Critical scholars such as Toy, 457, assert that this superscription has no historical value other than to report the later disposition that people attributed many proverbs to Solomon.

The proverbs in these chapters differ in that there are more multiple-line sayings and more similes; chs. 28 – 29 are similar to chs. 10 – 16, but chs.25 –

27 differ in having few references to God. For general material on 25:2 – 27, see Bryce, 145 – 57.

B. Proverbs 25:2 – 28

2 It is the glory of God to conceal a matter;
to search out a matter is the glory of kings.
3 As the heavens are high and the earth is deep,
so the hearts of kings are unsearchable.
4 Remove the dross from the silver,
and out comes material for the silversmith;
5 remove the wicked from the king's presence,
and his throne will be established through righteousness.
6 Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among great men;
7 it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here,"
than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.
What you have seen with your eyes
8 do not bring hastily to court,
for what will you do in the end
if your neighbor puts you to shame?
9 If you argue your case with a neighbor,
do not betray another man's confi dence,
10 or he who hears it may shame you
and you will never lose your bad reputation.
11 A word aptly spoken
is like apples of gold in settings of silver.
12 Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold
is a wise man's rebuke to a listening ear.
13 Like the coolness of snow at harvest time
is a trustworthy messenger to those who send him;
he refreshes the spirit of his masters.
14 Like clouds and wind without rain
is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.
15 Through patience a ruler can be persuaded,
and a gentle tongue can break a bone.
16 If you find honey, eat just enough —
too much of it, and you will vomit.
17 Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house —
too much of you, and he will hate you.
18 Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow

is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor.
19 Like a bad tooth or a lame foot
is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble.
20 Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day,
or like vinegar poured on soda,
is one who sings songs to a heavy heart.
21 If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the LORD will reward you.
23 As a north wind brings rain,
so a sly tongue brings angry looks.
24 Better to live on a corner of the roof
than share a house with a quarrelsome wife.
25 Like cold water to a weary soul
is good news from a distant land.
26 Like a muddied spring or a polluted well
is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.
27 It is not good to eat too much honey,
nor is it honorable to seek one's own honor.
28 Like a city whose walls are broken down
is a man who lacks self-control.

COMMENTARY

2 *Providence, searched out.* Kings must make things understandable to people, but God's providence is beyond knowing. This first saying expresses a contrast between God and kings. On the one hand, it is the glorious nature of God to "conceal" things.God's government of the universe is beyond human understanding — humans cannot fathom the divine intentions and operations. McKane, 579, rightly observes that this is appropriate to God: "When it is supposed that everything is known about God, it is no longer possible to worship him." He explains further that religion becomes ordinary and flat if there is no boundary to our understanding of him.

On the other hand, it is the glory of kings to "uncover" or "search out" things. Plaut, 257, says that human government cannot claim divine secrecy. Kings have to investigate everything; then they must make things open and intelligible to their subjects, especially judicial matters (Green-stone, 263). The juxtaposition

of these two lines basically forms a contrast; but kings who rule as God's representatives must also try to represent his will in human affairs; they must inquire after God to reveal his will.

3 *Counsel, of kings.* The king's decisions are beyond the knowledge of the people. Using formal — almost emblematic — parallelism, the sage records a simple political fact. While a king ought to make judicial matters clear to the people (v.2), many things are not made known, perhaps because of his superior wisdom, his caprice, or the necessity of maintaining confidentiality. But the comparison with the heavens as high and the earth as deep capture the nature of the king — he must be resourceful, inscrutable, always one step ahead, to keep a firm grip on power and to enhance his perception by the people.

4 – 5 *Stability, through righteous ness.* These two verses offer first an illustration and then its application (so emblematic parallelism). The lines are written with imperatives, forming instructive lessons. The first verse is problematic; removing "dross" (*sîgîm*) from silver does not produce "a vessel" (*kelî* ; cf. NIV margin) for the silversmith. Thus, some versions render it "material" (so the NIV) for the silversmith. The LXX states that it will be entirely pure. Following this approach, D. Winton Thomas reads kālîl v.20)and renders it "purified completely" ("Notes on Some Passages," 271 – 79). McKane, 580, simply rearranges the line to say that the smith can produce a work of art.

Whatever the exact reading for *kelî* is, the point is clear: Remove the wicked, and the throne will be established in righteous ness. Greenstone, 264, says, "The king may have perfect ideals and his conduct may be irreproachable, but he may be misled by unscrupulous courtiers." When these are purged, then the government will be left with righteous counselors and therefore "established through righteous ness."

6 – 7 *Humility, its wisdom.* It is wiser to wait to be promoted than to risk demotion by self-promotion. Promoting oneself in court may risk a public humiliation, but it would be an honor to have everyone in court hear the promotion from the king himself (see also Lk 14:8 – 11). The last line — "What you have seen with your eyes" — is attached to v.8 by the LXX, Syriac, Vulgate, and most modern translations.

8 *Speech, cautious testimony.* One must not be too eager to testify, lest one be put to shame publicly. “What you have seen with your eyes” (v.7c) fits well here, referring to a neighbor’s affairs (so the reference may be to a private matter). When this information is known, it would be risky to go “hastily” to court; for if the case had no valid claim, then one ends up in public disgrace. This is a warning to be cautious in divulging information.McKane, 581, urges that the verse speaks more of broken confidence than of hasty legal action and that it also applies to an administration that sees and hears things it must not divulge.

9 – 10 *Quarrels, private.* It is best to keep personal quarrels private to avoid public shame. These verses also are in the form of an instruction with a motivation. The thought runs that if in an argument with your neighbor you reveal another man’s confidence, he who hears you will shame you and you will always have a bad reputation.

To put it more directly, do not divulge secrets in order to clear yourself in an argument. The point involves damaging a friendship by involving others in a private quarrel. Plaut, 258, warns to stay in bounds if one must fight, for no success is achieved at the price of one’s integrity or someone’s hurt. Kidner, 157, brings the application forward: “To run to the law or to the neighbours is usually to run away from the duty of personal relationship — see Christ’s clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b.”

11 *Speech, profound.* The emblematic parallelism uses the simile of “apples of gold in settings of silver.” The meaning is not entirely certain; but it does speak of beauty, value, and artistry. The “apples of gold” (possibly apricots, citrons, quinces, or oranges) may refer to carvings of fruit in gold on columns. The point is obviously the immense value and memorable beauty of words used skillfully (Whybray, 148).

The expression translated “aptly” is *ʿal-ʾopnāyw* v.20)(lit., “on its wheels”). Noting the meaning of the term and the dual form of the word, McKane, 584, explains that the expression is metaphorical for the balancing halves of a parallel Hebrew wisdom saying: “The *stichos* is a wheel, and the sentence consisting of two wheels is a ‘well-turned’ expression.” The line then is describing a balanced, “well-turned” saying, a proverb (see 8:19; 15:23); it is skillfully constructed,

beautifully written, and of lasting value.

12 *Speech, rebuke.* A wise rebuke that is properly received is of lasting value. Another emblematic parallelism compares the rebuke to ornamental jewelry — it is pleasing and complimentary. The verse presents the ideal combination of a wise teacher and a willing student. (“Listening ear” means that the disciple is obedient in response to the rebuke.)

13 *Faithfulness, its appreciation.* A faithful messenger lifts up the spirits of those who sent him on the mission. The emblem in this verse is the “coolness of snow at harvest.”Various attempts have been made to explain this idea: snow at harvest would be rare, so it may refer to snow brought down from the mountains and kept in an ice hole (Whybray, 148); it may be the cool air with the snow, i.e., a “refreshing breeze that comes from the snowcapped mountains” (Greenstone, 266); it could be a snow-cooled drink (Toy, 464) or an application of ice water to foreheads (McKane, 585); or perhaps it is an imagined pleasure — snow at harvest (Plaut, 260).These suggestions, along with others, attempt to clarify the simile; but the lesson itself is clear enough — a faithful messenger is refreshing.

To “refresh the spirit” is *wᵉnepeš … yāšîb,* v.20) the idea being that someone who sends the messenger entrusts his life (i.e., his soul) to him; and a mission faithfully accomplished “restores” it to him. Faithfulness is always refreshing.

14 *Speech, bragging.* The promises of a boaster are empty.The illustration here is clouds and wind that lead one to expect rain but do not produce it; they gain attention but prove to be disappointing and hence deceitful. Similar is the windbag who brags of gifts to be bestowed, but the promise is deceitful (*šāqer* v.20) “he does not give”) — there are none. The lesson, of course, is not to make false promises.

15 *Speech, patient and mild.* Calm and patient speech can break down insurmountable opposition. The lines are loosely synonymous. By patience one can persuade a ruler. McKane, 585, suggests that the verb *yᵉputtah* v.20)(“be persuaded”) suggests the idea of “made to act like a *petî* [‘simple one’],” but the parallelism with “break a bone” argues for *pat*mâ II (“to persuade”). By soft speech a bone can be broken; that is, stiff opposition can be broken down.The verse recommends “conciliatory and persuasive advocacy which succeeds in the

end over against the most determined and studied recalcitrance" (ibid.; see also 14:29; 15:1, 18). Toy, 464, suggests changing "ruler" to "anger," arguing that princes are not shown forbearance; he then changes the verb as well to match. But these changes seem gratuitous.

16 *Conduct, moderation.* Anything in which one overindulges can become distasteful; indeed, one *can* get "too much of a good thing"! The verse displays formal parallelism, giving the condition and then its consequences. It teaches that moderation ("just enough") is necessary in the pleasures of life (see 16:24). Kidner, 159, says, "Since Eden, man has wanted the last ounce out of life, as though beyond God's 'enough' lay ecstasy, not nausea."

17 *Conduct, moderation.* Do not wear out your welcome with frequent visits. Verses 16 and 17 are similar in their words and ideas, with both advising moderate actions. The instruction to "seldom set foot" is literally "make your foot rare" (*hōqar raglᵉkā,* v.20) from *yāqar* v.20), "rare, precious"). D. W. Thomas suggests that *hōqar* v.20)is related to the Arabic *waqara* ("to overload, weigh heavily"), thus meaning here "make your foot heavy" (by staying away; cf. our expression, "make yourself scarce"; "Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs," *JTS* 38 [1937]: 402).The motivation for the warning is that familiarity breeds contempt.

18 *Speech, false witnesses.* False witnesses are deadly in society. The emblem line compares false witnesses to a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow — all deadly weapons. False witnesses can cause the death of innocent people (cf. Ex 20:16; Dt 5:20; also Pr 14:5).

19 *Character traits, unfaithfulness.* An unfaithful person is useless and painful. The verse also uses emblematic parallelism, starting with the similes of a bad tooth and a lame foot. Both are incapable of performing; they are painful and ineffective.

The second line makes the point: "is reliance [*miḇṭāḥ*] v.20) on the unfaithful [*bôḡēḏ*] v.20) in times of trouble." The verse has been taken two ways, with "reliance" [*miḇṭāḥ*] v.20) referring either to reliance on an unfaithful person or to what the unfaithful person relies on. Toy, 466, argues that what the faithless relies on will fail him in the time of trouble. Thus *mibta*. *h*m. refers to the ground of hope, e.g.,

wealth or power (as in 14:26: “has a secure fortress”). This view requires a slight change in pointing. The other view, which fits the Hebrew without changes, is that trusting a faithless person is like a decaying tooth or lame foot.

20 *Conduct, inappropriate.* Irresponsible attempts to cheer people up only make matters worse. This verse has some serious textual difficulty; the first line may be a dittogram — it is not in the LXX (see Note). As the MT stands, the verse is written in emblematic parallelism offering two similes for the point to be made. The first line refers to one who takes away a garment on a cold day. The verb usually means “adorn,” but here it must mean “lay off.”Removing a garment is inappropriate.

The second simile mentions pouring vinegar on soda (*ḥōmeṣ* on *nāter*). v.20). The reference is to sodium carbonate (occurring naturally in Egypt; see also Jer 2:22), which is neutralized with vinegar. But neutralizing sodium carbonate is doing something counterproductive. It would be inappropriate and counterproductive to “sing songs” to a “heavy heart” (*leb-nāʿ*) v.20). One needs to develop sensitivity to others; songs may only irritate grief. For an exceptional case, see the example of David’s serenading Saul (1Sa 19:9), though Saul’s response was unpredictable.

21 – 22 *Conduct, kindness to enemies.* People who treat their enemies with kindness will bring remorse to them and blessing from God. The saying includes an instruction and consequences. The imagery of the “burning coals” represents pangs of conscience, more readily affected by kindness than by violence. These burning coals produce the sharp pain of contrition through regret (see 18:19; 20:22;24:17; Ge 42 – 45; 1Sa 24:18 – 20; cf. Paul’s use in Ro 12:20).

The other consequence is that the Lord “will reward you” (*yᵉšallem-lāk*), v.20) though the rabbis took this in the causative sense: “will cause him to make peace with you” (Greenstone, 270). A reward coming from the Lord shows that this instruction belongs to the religious traditions of Israel.Plaut, 262, records a Chinese proverb on the same theme: “Meet good with good that good can be maintained; meet evil with good that good may be created” (see also G. R. Driver, “Problems and Solutions,” *VT* 4 [1954]: 225 – 45).

23 *Speech, sly words.* Sly words will infuriate people. The north wind that

brings the rain is compared with the “sly tongue” that brings angry looks. One problem in the verse concerns the north wind, for it is the west wind that brings rain to Palestine (1Ki 18:41 – 44). Toy, 468, suggests that the expression is general and means a northwest wind (possibly even in error). McKane, 583, summarizes and refutes the view of J. P. M. van der Ploeg (“Prov. 25:23,” *VT* 3 [1953]: 189 – 92) that the saying may have originated outside the land, perhaps in Egypt; if so, the saying is being used in a geographical area in which it doesn’t apply.

Whybray, 149, suggests the solution lies with the verb *ḥôlēl;* v.20) rather than meaning “brings forth,” perhaps it means more literally “distresses” (i.e., “repels, holds back”). His interpretation then is that as the north wind holds back the rain, so an angry glance prevents slander. In this case “sly tongue” denotes a “quiet tongue” that drives anger away. I prefer the basic meaning that as northerly winds bring rain, the sly tongue brings angry looks.The verse stresses inevitable results.

24 *Family, peaceful relationship.* Better to have peaceful solitude than companionship with strife.The verse is the same as 21:9.

25 *Speech, good news.* Good news refreshes the weary soul.The point of the verse is transparent (see also 15:30). It is true of love; it is true of spiritual realms. Toy, 469, notes that the difficulty of getting news from a distant place at that time heightened the refreshment of it. See for an illustration Genesis 45:27.

26 *Character traits, integrity.* A righteous man who loses his position is useless. The images of the “muddied spring” (fouled perhaps by crossing animals) and the “polluted well” suggest an action that is unforgivable. The comparison is with the righteous person who “gives way” (*māṭ,* v.20) lit., “moved”)before the wicked.

This verse has often been interpreted to refer to the loss of integrity by the righteous. Perowne, 161, says, “To see a righteous man moved from his steadfastness through fear or favour in the presence of the wicked is as disheartening as to find the stream turbid and defiled, at which you were longing to quench your thirst.” But the line may refer to the loss of social standing and position by plots of the wicked (Toy, 470). For the righ teous so to fall indicates

that the world is out of joint (see also McKane, 593).

27 *Character traits, self-glory.* To seek one's own glory is dishonorable. The second line of this verse is problematic; it should make an analogy to honey — glory is good, like honey, but not to excess; thus, McKane, 587 – 88, translates, "Be sparing in your encouraging words." The Hebrew literally says, "The investigation of their glory is glory." This sentence was rendered in the LXX as, "It is proper to honor notable sayings." A. A. MacIntosh suggested, "He who searches for glory will be distressed" ("A Note on Prov. 25:27," *VT* 20 [1970]: 112 – 14); Bryce, 145 – 57, has "to search out difficult things is glorious"; Raymond C.Van Leeuwen suggests "to seek difficult things is as glory" ("Proverbs 25:27 Once Again," *VT* 36 [1986]: 105 – 14); but Toy, 470, argues that the text is doubtful, each line having lost its original companion.

28 *Character traits, selfcontrol.* Without self-control a person is vulnerable.The point of the comparison to a broken-down city is that one who lacks self-control has no defenses.

NOTES

8 The word פֶּן v.20) (*pen*, “lest”) seems out of place in this proverb (NIV translates “for”). But Waltke, 2:303, notes that “lest” is an anacolouthon, “lest — what will you do?” The full thought would be something like “lest you lose the case, what will you do?” Toy, 461, suggests changing the word to כִּי (*kî*, v.20) “for”; cf. *BHS* margin) to make a better connection and avoid supplying an ellipsis.

20 The translation of *nāter* v.20)as “soda” does not harmonize well with the parallel lines. G. R. Driver (“Problems and Solutions,” *VT* 4 [1954]: 240 – 41) links the word to the Arabic *natru*(*n*), which has the idea of plunging a weapon into someone, and *natratu*, “deep wound.” This was the sense of the word according to the LXX. The Hebrew consonants מעדה בגד ביום קרה (*mʿdh bgd bywm qrh*) v.20) of this verse are similar to the consonants מועדת מבטח בוגד ביום צרה (*muʿdt* v.20) *mbt.h*. *bwgd bywm s.rh*) in v.19. The LXX has a much longer reading: “Like vinegar is bad for a wound, so a pain that afflicts the body afflicts the heart. Like a moth in a garment and a worm in wood, so the pain of a man wounds the heart.” The idea that verse 20 is a dittogram is not that convincing; and the LXX is too far removed to be of help in the matter.

C. Proverbs 26:1 – 28

1 Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
honor is not fitting for a fool.

2 Like a fluttering sparrow or a darting swallow,
an undeserved curse does not come to rest.

3 A whip for the horse, a halter for the donkey,
and a rod for the backs of fools!

4 Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you will be like him yourself.

5 Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

6 Like cutting off one’s feet or drinking violence
is the sending of a message by the hand of a fool.

7 Like a lame man’s legs that hang limp

is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
8 Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool.
9 Like a thornbush in a drunkard’s hand
is a proverb in the mouth of a fool.
10 Like an archer who wounds at random
is he who hires a fool or any passer-by.
11 As a dog returns to its vomit,
so a fool repeats his folly.
12 Do you see a man wise in his own eyes?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.
13 The sluggard says, “There is a lion in the road,
a fierce lion roaming the streets!”
14 As a door turns on its hinges,
so a sluggard turns on his bed.
15 The sluggard buries his hand in the dish;
he is too lazy to bring it back to his mouth.
16 The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes
than seven men who answer discreetly.
17 Like one who seizes a dog by the ears
is a passer-by who meddles in a quarrel not his own.
18 Like a madman shooting
firebrands or deadly arrows
19 is a man who deceives his neighbor
and says, “I was only joking!”
20 Without wood a fire goes out;
without gossip a quarrel dies down.
21 As charcoal to embers and as wood to fire,
so is a quarrelsome man for kindling strife.
22 The words of a gossip are like choice morsels;
they go down to a man’s inmost parts.
23 Like a coating of glaze over earthenware
are fervent lips with an evil heart.
24 A malicious man disguises himself with his lips,
but in his heart he harbors deceit.
25 Though his speech is charming, do not believe him,
for seven abominations fi ll his heart.
26 His malice may be concealed by deception,
but his wickedness will be exposed in the assembly.
27 If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it;
if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him.
28 A lying tongue hates those it hurts,
and a flattering mouth works ruin.

COMMENTARY

1 *Honor, inappropriate to fools.* Toy, 472, calls vv.1 – 12 the Book of Fools. Verse 1 indicates that honor is out of place with a fool. It draws a comparison with snow in summer and rain in harvest to show that honor does not "belong" (*nāʾweh*) v.20) to the fool.The "fool" (*kśîl*) v.20) is the stupid person who is worthless and vain (just the kind of person popular culture seems to honor). *Kābôd* v.20) ("honor," GK 3883) probably refers to the external recognition of worth, i.e., respect, advancement to high position, and accolades, but it can also include intrinsic worth. All the incongruities mentioned would mean that life is topsy-turvy (McKane, 595). The sage warns against elevating and acclaiming those who are worthless (see also J. A. Emerton, "Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs," *VT* 15 [1965]: 271 – 79).

2 *Speech, undeserved curse.* An "undeserved curse"is ineffective. Like a fluttering sparrow or darting swallow, it does not settle down, nor does it reach its destination (see 1Ki 4:33 for Solomon's interest in animals). It was commonly believed that blessings and curses had objective existence — that once uttered, the word was effectual. Scriptures make it clear that the power of a blessing or a curse depends on the power of the one behind it (e.g., Balaam could not curse what God had blessed; cf. Nu 22:38; 23:8).This proverb corrects superstition. The Word of the Lord is powerful because it is the Word of the Lord — he will fulfill it.

3 *Discipline, physical.* A fool must be controlled by physical force. The point of here is that the "fool" (*kśîl*) v.20) is as difficult to manage as a donkey or horse. Neither the fool nor these animals respond to reason but must be driven by whip, halter, or rod.

4 *Fools, responding to.* The one who responds to a fool appears like a fool. The instruction is that one should not answer a "fool" (*kśîl*) v.20) according to "his folly" (*kºiwwaltô;* v.20) see Rotenberg, "The Meaning of *ʾiwwelet* v.20)in the Proverbs," *Leshônênu* 25 [1960/61]: 201). One should not stoop to a fool's level of thought.To get into an argument with a fool in that way will only make one look like a fool as well.

5 *Fools, responding to.* The one who rebukes a fool will discourage him from thinking too highly of himself. The inclusion of both vv.4 and 5 posed a major problem for the rabbis; they solved it by saying that v.4 refers to secular things but v.5 to religious controversies. While this does not resolve the issue, it does present a sound application of the point being made — in negligible issues one should just ignore the stupid person, but in issues that matter, he must be dealt with lest credence be given to what he says (Plaut, 266).

The text presents together two sayings, each of which contains an aspect of the whole truth. The meaning of the two together is that one should not lower oneself to the level of a fool but that there are times when the lesser evil is to speak out than be silent. Whybray, 152, says these two verses are put together to show that human problems are often complicated and cannot always be solved by appealing to a single rule. A good example of answering a fool according to his folly is Paul's so-called "fool speech" to correct the foolish thoughts of the Corinthians (2Co 11:16 – 17; 12:11).

6 *Fools, useless as messengers.* To use a fool as a messenger is to invite trouble. The similes of "cutting off one's feet" and "drinking violence" are difficult to comprehend. Sending a messenger is like having another pair of feet; but sending a fool on the mission is not only no help, it is like cutting off the pair of feet one has — it is a setback! "Violence" (*ḥāmās*) v.20) is injustice or violent social wrongs and "drinking violence" is metaphorical for suffering violence; that is, sending a fool on a mission will only have injurious consequences. The verse gives the consequences in line one and the condition that causes them in line two. It is better not to send a message in the first place than to use a fool to deliver it.

7 *Fools, dense.* Proverbs are useless to fools. In this verse the emblem is a little unclear, but the point is not. The first line gives the simile: "Like a lame man's legs that hang limp" (*dalyû šōqayim mippissēḥ*). v.20)There have been various attempts to interpret *dalyû* , but the idea must include that the lame man's legs are useless to him; they hang down, thus preventing him from going too far. Likewise, the fool is a "proverb-monger" (as put by Toy, 474); he handles an aphorism about as well as a lame man walks.Plaut, 267, says that learning wisdom from a fool is like learning to dance from a lame man (though, of

course, a lame man could have intelligence and explain things). The fool does not understand the “proverb” (*māšāl*, v.20) has not implemented it, and cannot use it or teach it correctly or profitably.

8 *Honor, inappropriate to fools.* Honoring a fool is not only counterproductive, it is absurd. It is like “tying a stone” in a sling. Various attempts to explain this picture have been made. One, based on the Latin, sees it as referring to casting a stone into the heap of stones of (the god) Mercury (see Plaut, 267). Another explains it as hiding a precious stone among a heap of stones, i.e., a waste (Perowne, 163).But *margēmâ* v.20)is a “sling” (LXX, *sphendonē* v.20) and not Mercury or a heap; and “bind” fits the idea the best.Whybray, 152, explains that only someone who does not know how a sling works would do such a stupid thing. So to honor a fool is absurd, because what is intended cannot be accomplished — he will remain a fool.

9 *Fools, use of proverbs.* It is painful to hear fools use proverbs. The illustration is that of a “thornbush in a drunkard’s hand.” Toy, 475, interprets this image as more than a thorn; he pictures a half-crazy, drunken man brandishing a stick. But if in taking a thorn-bush the thorn pierces the hand (lit., “comes into the hand”), then the picture is of a drunk who does not know how to handle the thornbush because he cannot control his movements and so gets hurt (see McKane, 599). A fool can read or speak a proverb but will be intellectually and spiritually unfit to handle it; he will misuse it and misapply it. It is at just such a time as this that he should be answered (see v.5).

10 *Fools, dangerous.* Hiring a fool or a stranger is a dangerous thing to do. The one who hires such is compared to “an archer who wounds at random” (*rab mᶜḥôlēl-kōl* v.20)The line is difficult because it can be translated in different ways: *rab* can mean “archer,”“master,” or “much”; and *mᶜḥôlēl* v.20) can mean “wound”or “bring forth.”The possibilities include the follow-ing: “A master performs all”; “a master injures all”;“an archer wounds all”; or simply “much produces (wounds) all” (see Toy, 476, for the variety of inter-pretations). The line must express something that is negative — an archer/master who injures/wounds everything. Anyone who hires a fool or a stranger gives him ample opportunity to do great damage.The undisciplined hireling will have the same effect as an archer’s shooting at random.

11 *Fools, persist in folly.* Fools repeat their disgusting mistakes. No matter how many times a fool is warned, he never learns, not even from experience, but "repeats his folly." The simile of a dog's returning to his vomit is graphic and debasing; it is used in 2 Peter 2:22 to forestall returning to sin.

12 *Character traits, self-conceit.* Those who think they are wise are almost impossible to help. The saying uses a comparison to stress how difficult it is to curb self-conceit — a fool has more hope.Kidner, 163, observes that there is more for an able man's vanity to feed on and thus more damage that he can do. Self-conceit is actually a part of the folly the book decries, because for someone to think he is wise when he is not makes him a "conceited ignoramus" (Plaut, 268).

13 *Laziness, its excuses.* The sluggard uses absurd excuses to get out of work (see 22:13). This verse begins the Book of Sluggards (vv.13 – 16). Kid-ner, 163, provides a helpful overview of the section by explaining that the sluggard does not think he is lazy and so is self-deceived. A sluggard would say that he is a realist and not a shirker (v.13), that he is below his best in the morning and not self-indulgent (v.14), that his inertia is an objection to being hustled (v.15), and that he is sticking to his guns and not mentally indolent (v.16).

14 *Character traits, laziness.* The sluggard does not like to get out of his bed. The humor in this verse is based on the analogy with a door — it moves but goes nowhere. Likewise the sluggard is hinged to his bed. McKane, 601, says that the sluggard's turning in his bed "is the greatest degree of movement to which he aspires" (see also 6:9 – 10; 24:33).

15 *Character traits, laziness.* The sluggard is too lazy even to eat (see 19:24).

16 *Character traits, self-conceit.* The sluggard is filled with self-conceit. This fellow is self-satisfied; in his own opinion he is wiser than any number of people who "answer good sense," i.e., "discreetly." He thinks he has life all figured out and has chosen the wise course of action — but he is basically lazy. Greenstone, 269, says, for example, "Much anti-intellectualism may be traced to such rationalization for laziness."

17 *Conduct, meddling.* The subject matter concerns the one who "meddles" in

someone else's quarrel. Anyone who does so is asking for trouble. The Hebrew verb literally means "become excited" (*mitʿabbēr*) v.20) the Vulgate and the Syriac have "meddle" (reading *mitʿārēb*) v.20). The Hebrew could fit the line — someone who gets angry over the fight of another. The comparison is grabbing a dog by the ears — a dangerous thing to do, for dogs in the ancient world were wild, like jackals. So the person who makes trouble for himself cannot complain when he gets hurt.

18 – 19 *Speech, deceptive.* It is dangerous to deceive someone out of jest. Anyone who "deceives" his neighbor and then protests that he is "joking" is like a "madman" shooting deadly arrows. The practical joker is immature and thinks only of his own laughs. Plaut, 270, advises that "the only worthwhile humor is that which laughs with, not at others." By comparing the joker to a madman, the sage describes him as irresponsible and dangerous — he may hurt people while thinking it is all good fun.McKane, 602, says, "Liberties cannot be taken with dangerous weapons, nor can they be taken with the confidence of a friend."

20 *Conduct, gossip.* Gossip fuels strife. The instruction of the verse is to prevent a "quarrel"(*mādôn*) v.20) by restricting "gossip" (*nirgān*), v.20), just as one ends a fire by withholding the wood. For more on the talebearer, see 18:8.

21 *Character traits, quarrelsomeness.* Quarrelsome people start fights. The "quarrelsome man" (*ʾîš midwānîm*) v.20) in this instance is not unlike the *nirgan*m ("gossip") of v.20. His quarreling is like piling fuel on the fire — strife flairs up again and again.

22 *Speech, gossip.* Gossip is appealing. Here the words of a "gossip" (*nirgān*) v.20) are compared to choice morsels — they are eagerly and thoroughly "devoured" by those who hear them (see 18:8).

23 *Speech, deceptive.* Fervent speech may conceal evil plans.The sage compares hypocritical speech to the glazing over of an earthen pot. The Hebrew has *kesep sîgîm* ("silver dross"), which makes little sense, in spite of the attempts by commentators to explain it. Ugaritic has a word for "glaze" (*spsg*), paralleled in Hittite *zapzaga*(*y*)*a*. H. L. Ginsberg ("The NorthCanaanite Myth of Anat and Aqhat," *BASOR* 98 [1945]: 21; "Ugaritic Studies and the Bible," *BA* 8 [1945]: 57 – 58) repointed the Hebrew text to *kʿsapsagîm* v.20)("like glaze"), adopted by many

modern interpretations (so NIV; see also W. F. Albright, “A New Hebrew Word for ‘Glaze’ in Proverbs 26:23,”*BASOR* 98 [1945]: 24 – 25; Driver, “Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 173 – 97; Kenneth L.Barker, “The Value of Ugaritic for Old Testament Studies,” *BSac* 133 [1976]: 128 – 29).

Glaze covering a vessel makes it look dazzling and certainly different from the clay that it actually is. The analogy fits the second line very well: “fervent” (*dōlᵉqîm,* v.20) lit., “burning, glowing”) lips concealing an evil heart (the LXX reads “flattering lips,” as though from *ḥōlᵉqîm*) v.20). On the surface a person fervently says things that may be pleasing, perhaps protestations of affection; but they merely cover one’s true nature as one plotting evil.

24 *Speech, hypocritical.* Hypocritical words may hide a wicked heart. This verse repeats the sentiment of v.23 (and continues through v.27). Here the “malicious man” (*śônēʾ*) v.20) “disguises” (*yinnākēr*) v.20) the “deceit” (*mirmâ*) in his heart by what he says.

25 *Speech, hypocritical.* Charming words might merely cover evil thoughts. The sage warns the disciple, “Do not believe” (*ʾal-taᵃmen*) v.20) the one who has “charming” (*yᵉḥannēn*) v.20) speech, because there are countless (= “seven”) abominations he has planned.It will take great shrewdness and wisdom to discern who can be believed. This verse may have in mind a person who has already proven untrustworthy but who now is using speech to conceal and to put into action his evil plans.

26 *Retribution, certain*. Concealed malice will inevitably be made known. The proverb is concerned with how evil will be exposed. The lines are in antithetical parallelism, the first stating that “malice” (*śinʾâ*) v.20) may be concealed “by deception” and the second affirming that his evil will be exposed publicly. That righteous ness will ultimately be victorious informs this saying.

27 *Retribution, certain.* Whatever a man sows he will reap. The lines are set in synonymous parallelism, giving two illustrations of the point — digging a pit and rolling a stone. The digging refers to laying a trap for someone, and rolling a stone is probably on someone for greater force. Measure for measure justice is in view — he will fall into his own pit, or the stone will roll on him. For samples consider Haman (Est 7:10) and Daniel’s enemies (Da 6:24 – 28). Also see the

saying in *m. ʾAbot* 2:7 (drowning for drowning).

28 *Speech, deceptive.* Deceptive speech brings ruin without regard for those it may hurt. The two lines, loosely synonymous, portray the evil person who deceives ("lying tongue"//"flattering mouth") as one who ruthlessly ruins people. The "ruin" (*midḥ.eh*) that such a person works could be on himself (an idea that fits the context) or on others (which seems to be the point of the verse). The introduction of the motif of the tongue that "hates those it hurts" suggests that expressions of hatred help the deceiver justify what he is doing (Plaut, 271). In any case, only pain and ruin can come from deception. Kidner, 164, writes, "Truth is vital, and pride fatal, to right decisions." (See Driver, "Hebrew Notes on Prophets and Proverbs," 162 – 75.)

D. Proverbs 27:1 – 27

1 Do not boast about tomorrow,
for you do not know what a day may bring forth.
2 Let another praise you, and not your own mouth;
someone else, and not your own lips.
3 Stone is heavy and sand a burden,
but provocation by a fool is heavier than both.
4 Anger is cruel and fury overwhelming,
but who can stand before jealousy?
5 Better is open rebuke
than hidden love.
6 Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.
7 He who is full loathes honey,
but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.
8 Like a bird that strays from its nest
is a man who strays from his home.
9 Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart,
and the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel.
10 Do not forsake your friend and the friend of your father,
and do not go to your brother's house when disaster strikes you —
better a neighbor nearby than a brother far away.
11 Be wise, my son, and bring joy to my heart;
then I can answer anyone who treats me with contempt.
12 The prudent see danger and take refuge,

but the simple keep going and suffer for it.

13 Take the garment of one who puts up security for a stranger;
hold it in pledge if he does it for a wayward woman.

14 If a man loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning,
it will be taken as a curse.

15 A quarrelsome wife is like
a constant dripping on a rainy day;

16 restraining her is like restraining the wind
or grasping oil with the hand.

17 As iron sharpens iron,
so one man sharpens another.

18 He who tends a fi g tree will eat its fruit,
and he who looks after his master will be honored.

19 As water reflects a face,
so a man's heart reflects the man.

20 Death and Destruction are never satisfied,
and neither are the eyes of man.

21 The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold,
but man is tested by the praise he receives.

22 Though you grind a fool in a mortar,
grinding him like grain with a pestle,
you will not remove his folly from him.

23 Be sure you know the condition of your flocks,
give careful attention to your herds;

24 for riches do not endure forever,
and a crown is not secure for all generations.

25 When the hay is removed and new growth appears
and the grass from the hills is gathered in,

26 the lambs will provide you with clothing,
and the goats with the price of a field.

27 You will have plenty of goats' milk
to feed you and your family
and to nourish your servant girls.

COMMENTARY

1 *Plans, uncertain future.* Presumption about the future is dangerous because the future is uncertain.Line one is the instruction and line two the reason. The warning is, "Do not boast about tomorrow" (i.e., a metonymy for what you will do in the future). The verse is not ruling out wise planning for the future, only one's overconfident sense of ability to control the future — and no one can

presume on God’s future.

Rather, humility is required; one “must live from day to day, grateful for the life one has from God, with the awareness that it may be withdrawn at any time and that he must not speak or plan as if he himself had full disposal of his destiny and power over the future” (McKane, 607). See the development of the idea in James 4:13 – 16 and in Matthew 6:34 with the instruction not to worry (see also Lk 12:20). A second application of the verse is not to postpone to an uncertain future what is in one’s power to do at once (Greenstone, 282, citing *m.* ,*ʾAbot* v.20)2:8).

2 *Humility, praise from others.* It is best to let other people praise you. The verse is another instruction but now in synonymous parallelism. Self-praise is a form of pride, even if it begins with little things (such as whom you know, where you have been, etc.), and it does not establish a reputation. The reputation comes from what others think of you.“Someone else” in this proverb is literally “stranger”(*zār*) v.20) — a person who may speak more objectively about your accomplishments and abilities. On a practical level, the rabbis permitted one to make virtues and achievements known where one was not known (*b. Ned. 62a*).

3 *Fools, provocation of.* What a fool provokes is unbearable. Emblematic parallelism is used to make the comparison: stone and sand are heavy, and whoever carries them knows the work is exhausting and painful. But more tiring is the fool’s provocation, for the mental effort it takes to deal with it is more wearying than physical work; the fool brings a spiritual malaise for others to endure (McKane, 609).Toy, 482, does not think that “provocation by a fool”would be given the epithet “heavy,” so he proposes “anger”: “the anger of a fool is heavier than them both.” This suggestion is not compelling.

4 *Character traits, jealousy.* Jealousy is more unbearable than anger. The parallelism is formal, the comparison being drawn with a rhetorical question.The sage focuses attention first on anger that is ruthless and destructive (lit., “a flood of anger”; see Job 38:25; Ps 32:6; Na 1:8 for the imagery used for destruction). In contrast “jealousy”(*qinʾâ*, v.20) here probably in the negative sense (as opposed to the positive sense of zeal to defend a threatened institution for the right reasons), is a raging emotion that defies reason at times and takes the form of destructive violence, like a consuming fire (McK-ane, 611; see Pr 6:32 – 35; SS

8:6 – 7).

5 *Reproof, a part of love.* Direct reproof is better than unexpressed love.The verse is a single sentence forming a “better” saying of relative values. “Open rebuke” is a frank, direct word of honest criticism or disapproval (from either a friend or foe). “Hidden love” is a love that is too timid, too afraid, or not trusting enough to admit that reproof is a part of genuine love (McKane, 610). A love that manifests no rebuke is morally useless (Toy, 483). In fact, one might question whether or not it is sincere (see also 28:23; 29:3).

6 *Reproof, its value.* Reproof given in love is superior to insincere expressions of affection. The lines are set in antithetical parallelism contrasting the faithful (*neʾmānîm*; v.20) “can be trusted,” NIV) wounds of a “friend” (*ʾôhēb*) v.20) with the profuse (*naʿtārôt*; v.20) “multiplies,” NIV) kisses of an “enemy” (*śônēʾ*). v.20) The wounds of a friend “can be trusted” because they are meant to correct (see 25:12; cf. Dt 7:9; Job 12:20). But an enemy’s kisses are deceptive (e.g., the deceitful kiss of Judas [Mk 14:43 – 45]), in spite of their profusion. (For the word *naʿtārôt* v.20)the versions have a variety of translations —“confused,” “fraudulent,” “bad,” etc.)

7 *Character traits, need versus desire.* Those who have great needs are more appreciative than those who are satisfied. The verse contrasts the one who is “full” (*nepeš śōbēʿâ*) v.20) with the one who is “hungry” (*nepeš śōbēʿâ*) v.20) the former loathes honey, and the latter finds even bitter things sweet. The word *nepeš* in each half refers to the whole person with all one’s appetites. Most agree that the proverb is capable of wider application than eating; it can apply to possessions, experiences, education, etc. Toy, 483, suggests the idea of praise — it is nauseous to one who is much praised but greatly appreciated by one who seldom receives it. Greenstone, 284, suggests that one who thinks he is fully competent rejects rebuke.

8 *Security, abandoned.* To stray from home is to lose security. The parallelism compares a bird that “strays” (*nôdedet*) from a nest with the man who “strays” (*nôdēd*) v.20) from home.The reason for his straying is not given, but it could be because of exile, eviction, business, or irresponsible actions. Kidner, 165, thinks the sage condemns the one wandering because he has deserted his charge and forfeited his prospects; he is a rolling stone, but not a pilgrim or fugitive. The

saying may be more general and simply asserts that those who wander lack the security of their home and can no longer contribute to their community life (e.g., refugees who must move en masse). The verse could be portraying the wandering as an unhappy plight without condemning the wanderer as irresponsible.

9 *Advice, of a friend.* Advice from a friend is pleasant. The emblem is the joy that perfume and incense bring to people, and the point is the value of the advice of a friend. Line two of the verse is difficult.Toy, 484, suggests it is unintelligible as it appears in the Hebrew, which reads: “The sweetness of his friend from the counsel of soul.” Many interpreters take line two to describe the advice or counsel of a friend as sweetening the soul (see Note).

10 *Friend, helpful.* A friend who is available is better than a relative who is not. This verse is difficult. Toy, 485 – 86, suggests that the three lines put together have no immediate connection: v.10a instructs people to maintain relationships; v.10b says not to go to their brother’s house (only?) when disaster strikes; and v.10c observes that a neighbor nearby is better than a brother far away. Toy thinks a connection may have been there once but has long since disappeared; he also wonders whether v.10b is a gloss (see 17:17) from someone opposed to brothers. (Removing v.10b, however, does not make the verse clearer.)

The conflict between 17:17 and 27:10b may be another example of presenting two sides of the issue to show that such a matter cannot be resolved with one simple teaching. If the verse is preserved as it appears in the MT, it teaches us to maintain relationships with family and friends but to realize that a neighbor who is near will be of more help than a relative far away (“nearby” and “far away”referring to spatial distance, not feelings).

11 *Teaching, vindicated.* A wise son (disciple) enables a father (teacher) to defend himself against his critics. The verse gives an instruction (“Be wise”) with its consequence (“then I can answer anyone who . . .”). The expression “treats me with contempt” refers to the taunting or criticizing of the instructor as a poor teacher. Teachers are usually held responsible for the faults and weaknesses of their pupils; but any teacher criticized that way takes pleasure in pointing to those who have learned as proof that he has not labored in vain.

Along this concern, see 1 Thessalo nians 2:19 – 20; 3:8.

12 *Wisdom, wary of evil.* Avoiding the pitfalls in life requires wisdom. The contrast is between the "prudent" (ʿārûm) v.20) and the "simple" (pᵉtā³yim) v.20) the former is the mature person who has developed a wariness (1:4), and the latter is the inexperienced and untrained youth who stumbles into things.The verse is a motivation for the naive to be trained, for life will be far less painful for them if they know how to avoid its dangers (see 22:3).

13 *Obligations, fulfilled.* People must be held to their obligations no matter how foolishly they were made. The verse is essentially the same as 20:16.

14 *Speech, inappropriate greeting.* Loud and untimely greetings are not appreciated. At the least the verse tells us that how, when, and why we say what we say is important (see Kidner, 166). But there are a few ways to interpret this verse. On the surface it appears to be describing one who comes in early and loud with his blessing or greeting; he is considered a nuisance ("it will be taken as a curse").But "blesses" and "curse" could mean more; they could refer to the loud adulation of a hypocrite, the person who goes to great length to create the impression of piety and friendship but is considered a curse by the one who hears him. Another possibility, though less likely, is that the blessing is given prematurely, before the fortune is known, and that God, offended by the premature assumption, will reckon it a curse.

15 – 16 *Family, quarrelsome wife.* A quarrelsome mate is an unbearable irritant (see 19:13).The LXX interprets: "Drops [of water] drive a man out of his house on a wintry day; so a railing woman also drives him out of his own house."

Verse 16 would be obscure if it were not connected with v.15; it adds the idea that the quarrelsome wife is also uncontrollable. The first line says that "restraining her is like restraining the wind"(ṣōpᵉneyhā ṣāpan-rûaḥ) v.20). The wind is elusive; it can gust at any moment; so too is the woman who may burst out at any moment. The second line is "grasping oil with the hand," an expression Scott, 163, compares to our idiomatic "butterfingers."The point is that the husband is dealing with a woman as unpredictable and uncontrollable as a gust of wind or a hand grasping oil. Greenstone, 288, suggests a view that may be too

subtle: “oil” represents fatness, and that means power, i.e., she has to be restrained by force. The LXX also takes an etymologizing approach and arrives at “the north wind is a severe wind but by its name is termed auspicious.”

17 *Criticism, helpful.* Constructive criticism between friends develops character.The simile focuses on the use of iron to “sharpen” (*yāḥad*, v.20) from the root *h.dd*, “to sharpen,” as in the versions) iron. Possibly (*yāḥad*, v.20)is to be translated “together,” yielding the idea that they go together. But the point of line two is that a man sharpens the face of his fellow (*ʾîš yāḥad pᵉnê-rēʿēhû;* v.20) “one man sharpens another,” NIV). The word *pᵉnê* v.20)(“face”) here means the personality or character of the person. McKane, 615, suggests the idea of wits, i.e., that the interaction makes them sharp as a razor. The Talmud applied it to study: two students sharpening each other in the study of Torah (*b.Taʿan. v.20) 7a*; see also A. Sperber, “Biblical Exegesis,” *JBL* 64 [1945]: 39 – 140).

18 *Rewards, for service.* Those who faithfully serve will be rewarded in kind. Another emblematic parallelism, this verse uses the illustration that one who takes care of a fig tree will eat its fruit. A fig tree needed closer attention than other plants; so the point includes the diligent tending of it. A. Cohen suggests that *nōṣēr* v.20) (“tends”) refers to planting figs (“He Who Tends a Fig Tree Will Eat Its Fruit [Prov 27:18],” *Beth Mikra* 25 [1979]: 81 – 82; see Jer 31:5 – 6). The second line says that the servant “looks after” (*šōmēr*) v.20) his master, i.e., serves him meticulously by anticipating the needs and watching over his charge. Such a servant need not worry about his efforts going unrecognized or unrewarded (see also Pr 22:29; 2Ti 2:6, 15).

19 *Character traits, reflected in thoughts.* Thoughts reflect one’s true character.This verse is cryptic, and thus there are several suggestions as to its meaning. It is set in emblematic parallelism, with the first line forming the similitude. The verse literally says, “As water face to face / so a man’s heart to a man.” The simplest way to take the verse is to say that as clear water gives a reflection of the face, so the heart reflects the true nature of the man (NIV).The suggestion of Toy, 490, that through the observation of another a man can know himself is not convincing, for that interpretation requires another “(man’s) face” in line one. The point seems to be that through looking at our attitudes of heart we come to true self-awareness.

20 *Desires, insatiable.* The desires of human beings are as insatiable as "Death" and "Destruction." *šᵊ'ôl* and *ʾabaddôn* v.20) are expressions for the underworld (see 15:11). Generations of people have gone headlong into the world below, yet it is never satisfied. This observation forms the emblem of the point that the eyes of man "are never satisfied." The *Midrash* (*Ecc. Rab.* 1:34) says, "No man dies and has one-half of what he wanted."The LXX adds: "He who fixes his eye is an abomination to the Lord, and the uninstructed do not restrain their tongues."

21 *Character traits, praiseworthy.* Public praise is usually a good measure of the qualities and contributions of a person. The comparison of the point is with the crucible for silver and the furnace for gold — they refine and reveal the pure metals. So the idea is that a person "is tested by the praise he receives [*lᵉpî mahᵃlālô*, v.20)lit., 'by his praise']." Public praise formed a test for Saul and David (1Sa 18:7), with David's coming out the better for it. Public opinion, or the praise of others, is normally a good barometer; but there is the other side of the matter, namely, that righ teousness will be denounced (Mt 5:11). Another way to interpret *mahᵃlālô* v.20)is "the praise he gives"— we often stand revealed by what we praise (Kidner, 168). The LXX again adds a couplet: "The heart of the transgressor seeks evil; / but the upright heart seeks knowledge."

22 *Folly, unalterable.* Folly cannot be removed by force. The verse is in formal parallelism but is metaphorical, using the imagery of grinding grain in a mortar with a pestle, i.e., pulverizing, to talk about physical punishment for the fool. Since folly is his nature, it will not be removed from him. The LXX paraphrases the line — "If you scourge a fool in the assembly, dishonoring him, you would not remove his folly"— and in so doing removes its imagery.

23 – 27 *Wealth, transitory.* People should preserve what income they have because it does not long endure. The last few verses of the chapter form a little poem about the preservation of income. Verse 23 provides the main instruction: take care of your livelihood. The motivation for this is that riches do not last long (v.24). The reasoning for wisely taking care of one's income continues in the second half of the poem — the protasis being in v.25 and the apodasis in vv.26 – 27: If the growth is removed, they can sell and use their livestock. The poem shows the proper interplay between human labor and divine provision.

NOTE

9 The Latin has “the soul is sweetened by the good counsels of a friend.” Thomas suggests “counsels of a friend make sweet the soul” (“Notes on Some Passages,” 275). G. R. Driver (“Hebrew Notes,” *ZAW* 52 [1934]: 54; “Suggestions and Objections,” *ZAW* 55 [1937]: 69 – 70) suggests “the counsel of a friend is sweeter than one’s own advice” (lit., “more than the counsel of the soul”). He also suggests “more than of fragrant wood.” The LXX reads, “and the soul is rent by misfortunes.”

E. Proverbs 28:1 – 28

1 The wicked man flees though no one pursues,
but the righteous are as bold as a lion.

2 When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers,
but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains order.

3 A ruler who oppresses the poor
is like a driving rain that leaves no crops.

4 Those who forsake the law praise the wicked,
but those who keep the law resist them.

5 Evil men do not understand justice,
but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

6 Better a poor man whose walk is blameless
than a rich man whose ways are perverse.

7 He who keeps the law is a discerning son,
but a companion of gluttons disgraces his father.

8 He who increases his wealth by exorbitant interest
amasses it for another, who will be kind to the poor.

9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to the law,
even his prayers are detestable.

10 He who leads the upright along an evil path
will fall into his own trap,
but the blameless will receive a good inheritance.

11 A rich man may be wise in his own eyes,
but a poor man who has discernment sees through him.

12 When the righ teous triumph, there is great elation;
but when the wicked rise to power, men go into hiding.

13 He who conceals his sins does not prosper,
but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.
14 Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD,
but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.
15 Like a roaring lion or a charging bear
is a wicked man ruling over a helpless people.
16 A tyrannical ruler lacks judgment,
but he who hates ill-gotten gain will enjoy a long life.
17 A man tormented by the guilt of murder
will be a fugitive till death;
let no one support him.
18 He whose walk is blameless is kept safe,
but he whose ways are perverse will suddenly fall.
19 He who works his land will have abundant food,
but the one who chases fantasies will have his fill of poverty.
20 A faithful man will be richly blessed,
but one eager to get rich will not go unpunished.
21 To show partiality is not good —
yet a man will do wrong for a piece of bread.
22 A stingy man is eager to get rich
and is unaware that poverty awaits him.
23 He who rebukes a man will in the end gain more favor
than he who has a flattering tongue.
24 He who robs his father or mother
and says, “It’s not wrong” —
he is partner to him who destroys.
25 A greedy man stirs up dissension,
but he who trusts in the LORD will prosper.
26 He who trusts in himself is a fool,
but he who walks in wisdom is kept safe.
27 He who gives to the poor will lack nothing,
but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses.
28 When the wicked rise to power, people go into hiding;
but when the wicked perish, the righteous thrive.

COMMENTARY

1 *Confidence, of the righteous.* The faith of the righteous builds confidence. This observation is presented in contrast to the fear of the wicked, who flee when “no one pursues.” The proverb implies that the wicked, prompted by a guilty conscience or a fear of judgment, become fearful and suspicious of

everyone. But the righteous, who seek favor with God and humankind, have a clear conscience and thus no need to look over their shoulders, as it were (Kidner, 168). The righteous can have the confidence (*yibṭāḥ*; v.20)"are bold," NIV) to live righteously under God's providence.

2 *Stability, in government.* A nation's stability comes with a discerning and knowledgeable ruler.The verse uses antithetical parallelism to contrast the chaos of a sinful nation with the stability brought by a righteous order. In the first line the reference to "many rulers" indicates that during rebellious times a nation has many changes of power or many people vying for power. Plaut, 281, adds that people generally get the governments they deserve. The period of the judges and the days of the northern kingdom of Israel, with its nine dynasties, are examples of political instability as a result of sin.

The second line of the verse is difficult: literally, "by a man who is discerning and knowledgeable right lasts long" ("but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains order," NIV). Toy, 495, suggests that this part of the verse may not belong with line one (for a detailed survey of proposed emendations, see Toy and McKane, 630). The LXX reads (probably from a different text): "It is the fault of a violent man that quarrels start, but they are settled by a man of discernment." For an analysis of what chs. 28 and 29 say about kings and governments, see Bruce V. Malchow, "A Manual for Future Monarchs," *CBQ* 47 (1985): 238 – 45.

3 *Ruler, oppressive.* A ruler who oppresses the poor destroys his own dominion. The first line introduces the subject matter (one "who oppresses the poor"), and the second line, by a simile, tells of the effect — that like a driving rain he destroys and leaves nothing in the land (i.e., only the hardiest survive). The Hebrew has "a poor man"(*geber rāš*, v.20) "oppresses the poor" (*wᵉʿōšēq dallîm*) v.20).The problem is that the poor in the book of Proverbs are not oppressors and do not have the power to be such. So commentators assume *rāš* v.20) is incorrect. By slight changes the reading "ruler" can be obtained, and it seems to fit the verse and the book better (see Note). If the reading "poor man" is retained, then the oppression includes betrayal — one would expect a poor man to have sympathy for others who are impoverished, but in fact that is not the case.

4 *Law, respect for.* Obedience to the law determines one's attitude toward law-

breakers. The contrast is between “those who forsake the law” (ʿōzʿbê tôrâ) v.20) and “those who keep the law”(šōmʿrê tôrâ) v.20). Toy, 495, does not think that *tôrâ* refers to the law but to “instruction, teaching,” because “forsake” would be unexpected with “the law.” However, “keeping the law” implies that *tôrâ* is binding — which would not be true of teaching in general (see John Bright, “The Apodictic Prohibition: Some Observations,” *JBL* 92 [1973]: 185 – 204). Moveover, 28:9 and 29:18 refer to the law, and this chapter stresses the piety of God.

This verse gives the consequences of those who forsake the law as those who “praise the wicked”and of those who keep it as those who “resist them,”to which the Targum adds, “so as to induce them to repent.” Praising the wicked may mean calling them good, i.e., no longer able to discern good from evil. Kidner, 169, says, “Without revelation, all is soon relative; and with moral relativity, nothing quite merits attack”; he suggests a correlation with Romans 1:18 – 32.

5 *Justice, perceived.* Piety alone fully comprehends justice. This contrast between those who are evil and those who seek the Lord concerns the perception of justice. Mišpāṭ v.20). (GK 5477) refers to the legal rights of people; but there are always those who believe justice is that which benefits them — otherwise it is not justice (Plaut, 282). To “seek the LORD” originally meant trying to obtain an oracle from God (see 2Sa 21:1) but then came to refer to devotion to God (i.e., seeking to learn and do his will). Only people attuned to the divine will can fully perceive what justice is. Without that standard, legal activity easily becomes self-serving.

6 *Righteousness, better than unjust wealth.* Honest poverty is better than dishonest wealth (Toy, 497). The verse is set in formal parallelism presenting another “better” saying. The verse only contrasts a poor man with integrity and a perverse rich man (see 19:1) — there are, of course, rich people with integrity and poor people who are perverse.

The word for “ways” (dʿrākayim) v.20) is dual, suggesting that the person has double ways, i.e., he is hypocritical, a double dealer. Toy does not like the interpretation that dʿrākayim v.20)means good and bad ways (one way to interpret the dual), but his emendation to the plural is gratuitous. This chapter gives attention to the contrast between the rich man and the poor man, assuming an integrity to the poor that is not there in the rich (see also vv.6, 8, 11, 20, 22, 25,

27; Gordon A. Chutter,“Riches and Poverty in the Book of Proverbs,” *Crux* 18 [1982]: 23 – 28).

7 *Conduct, obedient versus profligate.* One who is obedient to the law will be discerning enough to lead an untarnished life. The antithesis is between the “discerning son” (one who has perception or moral illumination) and the “profligate” (“companion of gluttons,” NIV). Again, “law” could mean instruction, perhaps originally from a father; but in a chapter stressing religious piety, “law” probably refers to God’s law. Besides, in Proverbs a father’s instruction harmonizes with God’s law anyway.Obviously the son who becomes a “companion of gluttons” has not kept the law. He shames his father because such profligacy is unruly and antisocial and thus brings disrespect on the family (Greenstone, 296).

8 *Wealth, unjustly gained.* Wealth amassed by unjust means will eventually go to the poor. The law prohibited making a commission or charging interest (see Ex 22:25; Lev 25:36 – 37; Dt 23:20; Ps 15:5). These laws were concerned with the necessities of life; if the poor needed help, the wealthy should give it to them as charity — they were not to take advantage of another Israelite’s plight. This proverb assumes that wealth gained unjustly will eventually find its way to the poor. Greenstone, 297, says that the divine punishment for this activity is the loss of wealth and its reversion to those who “will be kind to the poor”and distribute it among those from whom it was taken.

9 *Prayer, of the lawless unanswered.* God will not listen to the prayers of those who do not listen to him. Such prayers certainly will not be proper prayers; anyone who refuses to obey God cannot pray according to God’s will but will probably ask for physical things and perhaps even make demands on God. Plaut, 284, suggests that one implication of this observation is that adult education is a prerequisite for meaningful worship. Of course, a prayer of repentance would not be an abomination to the Lord. But in general, as McKane, 623, observes,“Yahweh’s *rāṣōn* v.20) [‘favor’] is enjoyed by the *s.addîq* [‘righteous’], and his *tôʿēbâ* v.20)[‘abomination’] is incurred by the *nāšāʿ* v.20) [‘wicked’]. Hence one who fails to attend to Yahweh’s *tôrâ* v.20)[‘law’] is a *nāšāʿ* v.20) even if he is a man of prayer.”

10 *Rewards, just.* Destruction awaits those who corrupt others; rewards await

those who have integrity. Judgment is certain for those who lead the upright into evil; they will fall into their own trap.The line shows that the wicked will be caught in their own devices; but it also shows that the righteous are corruptible — they can be led into morally bad conduct (“an evil path”; see 26:27; Mt 23:15).

11 *Character traits, self-deceit.* Here is another contrast between the rich and the poor. In this one the rich man is filled with self-conceit, but the discerning poor man “sees through him” (*yaḥqᵉrennû*). v.20). With religious insight, i.e., “discernment” (*mēbîn*). v.20), the poor man searches out the flaws of the rich man — he sees through the pretension. Some argue that the verb *yaḥqᵉrennû* v.20)is to be derived from the Arabic *h.qr* (“despise”; see D. W. Thomas, “Notes on Some Passages in the Book of Proverbs,” *JTS* 38 [1937]: 402 – 3); the resulting reading is predictable and flat.

12 *Righteousness, in government.* People flourish under righteous administrations. The contrast is between the situations of the wicked’s coming to power and the triumphing of the righteous. The Hebrew reads literally, “when the righteous rejoice, great is the glory; but when the wicked arise to power, men are sought out.” Toy, 500, thinks the translation derived from this Hebrew has to be strained: “rejoice” = triumph = arise, i.e., come to power; and “are sought” = must be sought = have gone into hiding. He then constructs his own translation: “When the righteous are exalted there is great confidence, but when the wicked come into power men hide themselves.” For *yᵉḥuppaś* v.20) Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,”192 – 93) posits an Arabic cognate *h.ahaša* (“prostrated, trampled on”), which gives a more direct result of the rule of the wicked but is perhaps an unnecessary change (see also v.28; 29:2; Emerton, 202 – 20).

13 *Repentance, effectual.* Repentance and renunciation of sin bring God’s mercy and blessing. This verse is unique in Proverbs; it captures the theology of forgiveness found in passages such as Psalm 32:1 – 5 and 1 John 1:6 – 9. The contrast is between one who “conceals” his sins and one who “confesses and renounces them.” The former will not prosper;the latter will find God’s “mercy” (*yᵉruḥām*). v.20). Each part of this verse is essential to the truth: “confession must be coupled with true return in order to assure God’s mercy” (Plaut, 285). Would that the people of God were half as faithful in showing mercy as God is!

14 *Fear of the Lord, godly.* One's prospects in this life depend on reverential fear. This verse contrasts the one who "always fears" (*mᵉpaḥēd tamîd*) v.20) with the one who hardens his heart. The first is blessed, and the second falls into trouble. The verse gives no object for "fear": various translations have assumed that the Lord is its object (so NIV), especially in Proverbs. But *yirʾâ* v.20)("fear") is not used here. Perhaps the verse means fear of sin. In other words, the one who is always apprehensive about sin and its results will be more successful at avoiding it and finding God's blessing. Or perhaps the blessing is the avoidance of sin, for ,*ʾašrê ʾādām* (cf. Ps 1:1, *ašrê hāʾîš*, v.20) "Blessed is the man") describes the heavenly bliss of the one who is right with God.

15 *Rulers, wicked.* Political tyrants are dangerous and destructive. The wicked man who rules over "helpless people" is compared to a "roaring lion"and a "charging bear" — subhuman, beastly, powerful, insensitive, in search of victims (prey). Because tyrants are like this, animal imagery (beast imagery?)is used in Daniel 7:1 – 8 for the series of ruthless world rulers. The poor crumple under such tyrants because they cannot meet their demands.

16 *Rulers, good versus bad.* The righteous ruler, not the tyrant, will remain in power. The first line reads literally, "The prince who lacks understanding is also a great tyrant" (*nāgîd ḥᵃsar tᵉbûnôt uʿrab maᶜᵃšaqqôt*) v.20). The LXX has "lacks income" (reading *tᵉbuʾōt* or *tᵉnûbōt* v.20) instead). Toy, 501, suggests deleting *nag*m*îd* ("prince") altogether. Assuming *nāgîd*] v.20)belongs in line one, however, this ruler will face the danger of rebellion and even assassination. The second line describes the one who rules with integrity; he "will enjoy a long life" (*yaᵃrîk yāmîm*, v.20) lit., "extends days"). A righteous administration pleases the people and God, who preserves it.

17 *Guilt, its effects.* The guilty fugitive will be isolated. This verse has some difficulties for the interpreter. The first line literally says, "A man tormented by the blood of a life"(*ʾādām ʿāšuq bᵉdam- nāpeš*) v.20) Toy, 502, thinks the words make no sense but may have at one time been part of a law book and were inserted here by mistake.

Other commentators try to emend <*ašmuq* (lit., "oppressed"). Greenstone, 300, draws from the cognate in Syriac the meaning "accused," which may be reflected in the Targum as "suspected" or "charged with." This meaning yields

the reading, “A man charged with murder shall flee to the pit.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 192) suggests ʿōšēq v.20)(“busied himself ”) in Aramaic or ʿašīga v.20)(“clung to”) in Arabic as possible links: “a man given to bloodshed.” But it may be that if the motive for this saying is religious and not legal (as Toy, 502, says), the idea of “oppressed” is workable. At any rate, the second line of the verse is either saying that it is futile to try to support a murderer on the run or that one should not interfere.

18 *Security, based on integrity.* Integrity brings security; perversion brings insecurity. A life of integrity (hôlēk tāmîm; v.20) “walk is blameless,” NIV) is contrasted with the one “whose ways [dual; see v.6] are perverse [neʿqaš]' v.20)”; the result of the righteous lifestyle is being “kept safe,” whereas the wicked will fall. The last word, bᵉʾeḥāt v.20) (“at one [once]”), may indicate a sudden fall (cf. NIV). McKane, 622, wishes to emend bᵉʾeḥāt v.20) to šaḥat, v.20) “into a pit,” based on v.10b, where he first emended the word.

19 *Diligence, its results.* Prosperity depends on diligent work. This verse is essentially the same as 12:11. There is a meaningful repetition here: the diligent person will have “plenty [yiśbaʿ] v.20) of bread,”but the lazy person will have “plenty [yiśbaʿ] v.20) of poverty” (RSV).

20 *Character traits, faithfulness.* Faithfulness determines success. The “faithful man” (ʾîš ʾᵉmûnôt) v.20) is contrasted with the one who is “eager to get rich” (ʾāṣ lᵉhaʿᵃšîr) v.20). The first is faithful to his obligations to God and to other people, whereas the one who hastens to make riches is doing it without an honest day’s work and perhaps even dishonestly. In a hurry to acquire wealth, he falls into dishonest schemes and bears the guilt for doing so; he will not go unpunished.The Targum adds the interpretation — probably a correct one — that he hastens through deceit and wrongdoing.

21 *Injustice, bribery*. Partiality in judgment is wrong, even though easily acquired. To show partiality (hakkēr-pānîm) v.20) destroys justice (see Lev 19:15;Dt 1:17; 16:19; Pr 18:5; 24:23). The second line of this verse has several possibilities. It could mean that a man can be bribed for a very small price (a piece of bread being the figure for it), or that some might steal for a piece of bread so the judgment should show a little more compassion on the crime of desperation, or that even in such a desperate act one should show no partiality.

The first interpretation harmonizes best with the law. Kidner, 172, adds poignantly that the price can go even lower than a piece of bread and that what is true of judges is true of preachers, too (see also Mal 2:9).

22 *Avarice, its effect.* Avarice inevitably leads to poverty. Here we meet the man with the "evil eye"again (*ʾîš raʿ ʿāyin*; v.20) the expression was used in 23:6 for the selfish, "stingy man" [NIV] who looks at all the wrong things in life). Here he is eager for wealth; the presumption is that greed involves sin, for which he will be punished with poverty. In 22:9 we had the "good eye" ("generous man," NIV).McKane, 627, terms the "bad eye" as the misanthropic person (greed being one expression of mis-anthropy) and the "good eye" as the philanthropic person.

23 *Reproof, preferable to flattery.* In the final analysis rebuke will be better received than flattery. The flattering tongue may be pleasing for the moment, but it will not offer constructive help like that of the "rebuke" (*môkîah*.). There is a difficulty with the word rendered "in the end" (,*ah*.*aray*). It literally means "after me" (e.g., "after my instructions"),but that phrase is awkward here. Toy, 504, suggests simply changing it to "after" or "afterward," i.e., "in the end." Driver suggested an Akkadian cognate *ahurru* ("common man"), reading, "As a rebuker an ordinary man" (Driver, "Hebrew Notes," *ZAW* 52 [1934]: 147; see also 15:5, 12; 25:12; 27:5 – 6; 29:5).

24 *Conduct, robbing parents.* Whoever robs his parents, no matter how he seeks to justify the act, is a destroyer. The point of (*gôzēl ʾābîw* v.20)("he who robs his father") seems to be that of prematurely trying to gain control of the family property through some form of pressure and in the process reduce the parents' possessions and standing in the community.He can say, "It's not wrong" (*ʾên-pāšaʿ*) v.20), because he can reason that it someday will be his anyway. The proverb classifies this type of greedy person as a companion to one "who destroys" (*mašh*.*ît*).

25 *Character traits, greed versus trust.* One's object of faith determines the direction of one's life. The antithetical parallelism pits the "greedy man" (*rḥb*‑*nepeš*, v.20). *ab*-*nepeš*,"large appetite"; lit., "wide of soul") against the one "who trusts" (*bôṭēaḥ*) v.20) the Lord. The first one is completely selfish and usually ruthless. His attitudes and actions stir up strife because people do not long tolerate him. He pushes so hard for the things he wants that his zeal becomes a hindrance to

obtaining them. Conversely, the true believer, who is blessed by God, “will prosper” (lit., “will be made fat,” i.e., abundantly prosperous).

26 *Conduct, righ teous, versus self-sufficiency.* Security comes from a life of wisdom and not from self-sufficiency. Some commentators think the lines of vv.25 and 26 got mixed up; they would arrange them as follows: 25a, 26b, 25b, 26a (see Toy, 505 – 6).As it stands, v.26 in the Hebrew is set in antithetical parallelism, contrasting the one who trusts in himself (*bôṭēaḥ bᵉlibbô*) v.20) with the one who “walks in wisdom.” Toy says that trusting in one’s own heart means following the untrained suggestions of the mind or relying on one’s own mental resources. If he is correct, the idea forms a fitting contrast to walking in wisdom, i.e., the wisdom from above that this book has been teaching. McKane, 621, observes that the end of the process of education is none other than to make the person rely on his own intellect *once it has been informed and disciplined* ; so v.26a presumes impiety.

27 *Generosity versus indifference.* Generosity is rewarded, but indifference is cursed (see also 22:9; 11:24 – 26). A generous person will not miss what he gives away (Greenstone, 303), but the one who is indifferent to the needs of the poor will be cursed often — by them no doubt.

28 *Stability, righteous government.* The righteous flourish when wickedness is removed from government. The verse is essentially the same as 28:12, only in reverse order (see also 11:10; 29:2, 16). For “go into hiding” (*yissātēr*), v.20) Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 192 – 93) suggests the Akkadian *satānu* v.20)(“demolish”), cognate to the Aramaic *setar* (“destroyed”).

NOTE

3 The word רָשׁ (*rāš*; v.20) "poor," NIV margin) is often emended to רֹאשׁ (*rō'š*; v.20) "chief [ruler]" (NIV). McKane, 629, suggests for רֹאשׁ (*rō'š*; v.20)a meaning of "principal." The LXX understood the word as רָשָׁע (*rāšā'*; v.20) yielding the translation of *geber ras* רָשָׁע (*rāšā'*; v.20) as "a wicked ruler." But the MT can easily be translated "a destitute man and one who oppresses the poor."

F. Proverbs 29:1 – 27

1 A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes
will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.

2 When the righteous thrive, the people rejoice;
when the wicked rule, the people groan.

3 A man who loves wisdom brings joy to his father,
but a companion of prostitutes squanders his wealth.

4 By justice a king gives a country stability,
but one who is greedy for bribes tears it down.

5 Whoever flatters his neighbor
is spreading a net for his feet.

6 An evil man is snared by his own sin,
but a righteous one can sing and be glad.

7 The righteous care about justice for the poor,
but the wicked have no such concern.

8 Mockers stir up a city,
but wise men turn away anger.

9 If a wise man goes to court with a fool,
the fool rages and scoffs, and there is no peace.

10 Bloodthirsty men hate a man of integrity
and seek to kill the upright.

11 A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man keeps himself under control.

12 If a ruler listens to lies,
all his officials become wicked.

13 The poor man and the oppressor have this in common:
The LORD gives sight to the eyes of both.

14 If a king judges the poor with fairness,
his throne will always be secure.

15 The rod of correction imparts wisdom,
but a child left to himself disgraces his mother.
16 When the wicked thrive, so does sin,
but the righteous will see their downfall.
17 Discipline your son, and he will give you peace;
he will bring delight to your soul.
18 Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint;
but blessed is he who keeps the law.
19 A servant cannot be corrected by mere words;
though he understands, he will not respond.
20 Do you see a man who speaks in haste?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.
21 If a man pampers his servant from youth,
he will bring grief in the end.
22 An angry man stirs up dissension,
and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.
23 A man's pride brings him low,
but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.
24 The accomplice of a thief is his own enemy;
he is put under oath and dare not testify.
25 Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.
26 Many seek an audience with a ruler,
but it is from the LORD that man gets justice.
27 The righteous detest the dishonest;
the wicked detest the upright.

COMMENTARY

1 *Character traits, stubbornness.* Destruction comes swiftly to those who stubbornly refuse to change.The verse is a warning about the peril of persisting in sin; it uses the image of the "stiff neck" (*maqšeh*-<ʿōrep) v.20) to portray the obstinate person who disregards all rebukes (see Ex 32:9). The opposite of the stiff neck is a bending neck, i.e., submission.

The stubborn person does not foresee misfortune and so will suddenly "be destroyed" without any healing. Whybray, 167, illustrates this fate with the fable of the oak and the bulrush; the latter bends with the wind and survives, but the former is too rigid and breaks. For similar proverbs see 6:15;13:18; and 15:10.

2 *Righ teousness, its affect on morale.* Good people can enjoy life when righteousness predominates in government. The antithetical parallelism supports the interpretation of the righteous increasing to mean that they gain control (Greenstone, 305).When the righteous are in authority, there is rejoicing; but people suffer under wicked regimes (see 11:10 – 11; 28:12, 28).

3 *Wisdom, its affect on the family.* Wisdom ensures joy and prosperity for the family. Here again the lines are antithetical: in contrast to the wise person, who brings "joy" to his father, is the son who brings grief by squandering his wealth on "prostitutes" (*zônôt*).Whybray, 168, notes that since wealth was a sign of God's blessing, it was essential for an honorable standing in the community; to waste it was a shameful betrayal of the family. Moreover, it would break a father's heart to see his son become a pauper through vice (McKane, 653). For the financial consequences of vice, see chs. 1 – 9 (esp. 5:10; 6:31).

4 *Security, through justice.* A nation is secure when justice prevails. This verse contrasts a king who makes the nation secure (lit., "stand," *ya*ᶜ*mîd*) v.20) with one who "tears it down" (*yehersennâ*).The first brings prosperity by championing "justice" (*mišpat* m). ; the second is a "man of bribes" (*ʾîš tᵉrûmôt;* v.20) "one who is greedy for bribes," NIV). The term *terûmâ* usually refers to "ritual offering"; here it refers to exactions or taxes. The idea of "bribes" is not the point; this king breaks the backs of the people with demands for monetary gifts (see 1Sa 8:11 – 18), thus causing divisions and strife.

5 *Speech, deceptive.* False flattery is self-destructive. The subject is one who "flatters his neighbor." This flattering (*maḥᵉlîq*) v.20) works by deception and guile, for the word literally means "deals smoothly." McK-ane, 636, says, "The sycophant is not to be trusted, for words which are too smooth and too obviously designed to gratify are a form of premeditated malice and a cloak for evil conduct." There is some uncertainty as to the referent in the second line: "he spreads a net for his steps." The phrase could designate a net spread for the one flattered or for the flatterer himself. The latter would make the message of the verse more powerful (see also 2:16;7:5; 26:28; 28:23).

6 *Security, of the righteous.* Only the righteous can enjoy a sense of security. By means of another antithetical saying, the sage observes that the evil man is

caught in his own sin (similar to v.5), but the righ teous sing and are glad — two expressions that signify their confidence. The first line literally says “in the transgression of a bad man is a snare”;the Syriac simplifies the expression and makes the verb passive (see also NIV; Toy, 508). The second line makes the contrast that the righteous have no fear of snares and so can sing.

The verbs *yārûn* v.20)(“sing”) and *śāmēaḥ* v.20). (“be glad”)present problems. Because Proverbs does not usually duplicate such verbal ideas and because *yārûn*is irregular, some commentators change it to *yārûn*.(“will rush,” *BHS*). Toy, 508, suggests “run,” but McKane, 638, emends to “exult” to form a hen-diadys: “is deliriously happy.” Driver (“Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs,” 193 – 94), changing *mûqāš* v.20) (“snare”) to *mûqāš* v.20) (“is snared”) after the Peshitta and Targum, changes *yārûn*to *yārûn*(“remains”) based on two manuscripts (Arabic *dāna,* v.20), “continue”). He then translates, “The evil man is snared, but the righteous remains and rejoices.”

7 *Justice, for the poor.* Only the righ teous champion justice for the poor. This antithetical parallelism pits the righteous against the wicked. The righteous person cares (*yōdēaʿ,* v.20) “knows,” meaning “has sympathetic knowledge of ” or “considers favorably” [Toy, 508]) about justice for the poor (i.e., their rights; see 20:8; 31:5, 8); but the wicked do not “discern knowledge” (*yābîn dāʿat*) v.20) — they have no such interest or insight into the problems of the people (see Job 29:12 – 17).

8 *Wisdom, averting anger.* The wise maintain peace and harmony in society. This contrast tells how the wise “turn away anger” rather than “stir up” strife. The “men of scoffing” or “mockers” are “men who laugh at moral obligations and stir up the baser passions of their fellow citizens (Isa. 28:14)” (Toy, 508 – 9). The idea of “stir up” is from the Hebrew *yāpîḥû* v.20)(“blow,” as in “blow up a flame,” i.e., kindle a fire; see also its use in 6:19; 12:17, where it suggests to “puff out” words). Such scoffers make dangerous situations worse, whereas the wise calm things down and ensure peace in the community. See the account of the rebellion of Sheba the son of Bicri and how the wise woman averted disaster (2Sa 20).

9 *Strife, exacerbated.* It is a waste of time to try to settle a dispute calmly or rationally with a fool.The first line presents the condition and the second the

effect. To go into court with a fool, you have to reckon “with unreasonable and objectionable behavior and a complete lack of proportion”(McKane, 636). Whether this “fool”(ʾĕwîl) v.20)is angry or laughing, there is no possible resolution to the matter (ʾên nāḥat; v.20) “no peace,” NIV). One can only cut the losses and have no further dealings with him (see Whybray, 168; see also 26:4 and its warning not to answer a fool).

10 *Righteousness, hated by the wicked.* Bloodthirsty men loathe the integrity of the upright. Because the wicked despise all sense of decency or “integrity”(tām) v.20), they seek to destroy it. The second line forms a contrast; literally it reads, “as for the upright, they seek his life [*napšô*].” “Seeking a life” was usually a hostile act, but here the contrast requires the idea of “seek to preserve a life” (interpreted differently by the NIV). McKane, 637, is satisfied that here “seek”means to seek the welfare of someone; thus it means that the upright “have regard for” men of integrity.

11 *Character traits, self-control.* It takes wisdom to restrain anger. The antithesis is between the “fool”(*kesîl*), who lets out all his anger, and the wise, who “stills it back” (ʾāḥôr) v.20). The line is difficult but does make sense as it stands (see Note). The wise man holds his anger in check, but the fool is the “slave of impulse and is at the mercy of every moment when he chances to feel irritation” (McKane, 635;see also 16:32; 25:28).

12 *Speech, lies.* Once a ruler begins to listen to lies, his court will be corrupted. The point is that courtiers adjust themselves to the prince (see Toy, 510); when they see that deception and court flattery win the day, they learn how the game is played.Plaut, 292, reminds us of the Roman saying, *Qualis rex, talis grex* (“like king, like people”; see 16:10;20:8; 25:2).

13 *Life, from God.* Regardless of status or circumstances, all people receive their life from God.These lines are set in synthetic parallelism.The first links the poor man and the oppressor (the LXX has “debtor” and “creditor”), and the second explains what they have in common: “The LORD gives sight to the eyes of both.” The imagery of giving sight means that God gives the light of life (see Job 33:30; Ps 13:3). God creates and controls them all (see Pr 22:2).

14 *Poor, treatment of.* The duration of an administration depends on its moral

character. This verse shows the importance of guaranteeing that fair and just treatment is given to all (judging with "fairness" [*mešpāṭ*, v.20), lit., "truth"]), especially the poor. To fail to do so is immoral (see 16:12; 20:28; 25:5; 31:5).

15 *Discipline, its effect.* Discipline makes a child's behavior enjoyable. The lines form a contrast: "a rod of correction" ("rod" and "correction" form a hendiadys, viz.,"a correcting rod") versus leaving a child alone (*mᵉšullāḥ* v.20). The focus on the mother in the last part is probably a rhetorical variation for the parent (see 17:21; 23:24 – 25) and not meant to assume that she will do the training (see also 13:24; 23:13).

16 *Judgment, its certainty.* No matter how much wickedness spreads in the land, righteous ness will live to see it destroyed. This verse teaches that righteous ness will prevail, but it does not say when or how. The first part merely affirms the equation that when the "wicked thrive," sin thrives. But one day the righteous will prevail over them (*yirʾû bᵉ*, v.20) signifying to "see their downfall" triumphantly).

17 *Discipline, its effect.* A disciplined child brings contentment to parents. The parallelism is synthetic, with the second line adding the thought of "delight" to that of "giving peace" (*wᵉnîḥekā*, v.20) "giving rest, relieving anxiety," as in Dt 12:10; see Pr 19:18).

18 *Revelation, obedience to.* A nation's well-being depends on obedience to divine revelation. This popular verse refers to two forms of divine revelation, vision and law. The first line is worded negatively — if there is "no revelation" or "vision" (*ḥāzôn*; v.20) GK 2606), the people "throw off restraint" (*yippāraʿ*). v.20). The word (*ḥāzôn*;refers to divine communication to prophets (as in 1Sa 3:1) and not to individual goals that are formed.

Toy, 512, sees a problem with this meaning, in that the most calamitous period of Israel's history was when prophetic vision was at its height, whereas people were obedient at times when God hid his face. He also notes that in Proverbs there is no mention of prophetic teaching with wisdom as a guide. Thus, following the LXX, Toy emends (*ḥāzôn*;to read "guidance."The TEV has "guidance"; the NIV has "revelation." It should be stated, however, that the prophetic ministry usually came in response to periods of calamity to call the

people back to God, so that (ḥāzôn; meaning revelatory vision should be retained. If there is no revelation from God, people can expect spiritual and political anarchy (Alden, 202). The meaning “cast off restraint” is assumed for yippāreʿ v.20) based on Exodus 32:25. In contrast to the first line, the second provides the positive wording: there is a blessing for those who keep the law.

19 *Discipline, its method.* It is not sufficient to train servants by words alone. The verse shows that slaves had to be treated like sons (i.e., they frequently had to be corrected), for they were naturally unresponsive (McKane, 634). The second line gives the explanation: (lit.) “though he understands, there is no answer.”That is, he does not obey when spoken to; he has to be trained. The verse is probably a general observation on the times; doubtless there were slaves who did better (e.g., Joseph in Egypt; Daniel in Babylon).

20 *Speech, rash.* It is easier to train a fool than to correct rash speech. The focus in this verse is on the one who is hasty with words — to speak before thinking something through is foolishness.The prospects (*tiqwâ*, “hope”) of the fool are better, for rash speech cannot easily be remedied (see 26:12; Jas 3:8).

21 *Discipline, lack of.* An undisciplined servant causes nothing but grief. The proverb says that if someone pampers his servant from youth, in the end (of this process) he will have “grief ” (mānôn v.20);GK 4959). The word mānôn v.20), a *hapax legomenon*, has been given a variety of translations; the idea of “grief ” comes from the LXX. J. Reider (“Etymological Studies in Biblical Hebrew,” *VT* 4 [1954]:276 – 95) takes the word to mean “weakling” from an Arabic root *na,na* (“to be weak”), with a noun/ adjective munaʾanaʾ v.20) (“weak, feeble”).

22 *Character traits, anger.* Anger brings strife.The lines, in synonymous parallelism, focus on the “angry man” (*,îš-,ap*) — one who is given to anger and not merely temporarily angry. Not only does such a one stir up “dissention” (*mad*m *ôn*), but in so doing he also causes sin in himself and in others (see also 14:17, 29; 15:18; 16:32; 22:24).

23 *Character traits, pride and humility.* A humble spirit brings honor and respect. The verse contrasts consequences: pride leads to abasement, but humility brings exaltation. The lines are tied together with a paronomasia between “brings low” (*tašpîlennû*) and “lowly [šᵉpal] v.20) in spirit.” McKane, 633,

explains that the lowly one can learn, but “pride is a way of descent to mediocrity or worse” (see Lk 14:11; 18:14).

24 *Sin, its entanglements.* An accomplice in crime will find no easy way out of his dilemma. This verse is a little confusing; it describes the accomplice of a thief as his own enemy (lit., “he hates [śônēʾ] v.20) himself ”) — he hears a curse (ʾālâ yišmaʿ) v.20) and will not speak up. According to Leviticus 5:1, if a witness does not speak up, he is held accountable for the crime. The case here might be one in which the guilty person is unknown; and when a curse is pronounced on that unknown culprit, the accomplice hears it but cannot speak up. So the curse attaches itself to him as well (see Toy, 514). Another way to explain the verse is that the accomplice, when called as a witness (translating ,(ʾālâ yišmaʿ) v.20) as “he is put under oath”), perjures himself. The saying may have been aimed at some official who used crooks and then shielded them in legal inquiries.

25 *Security, faith in the Lord.* True security is the result of trusting God and not humans. The contrast is between “trusting” (bôṭēaḥ) v.20) the Lord and “fearing man” (ḥerdat ʾādām) v.20). Such fear becomes a snare when it gets to the point of letting others control your life — their opinions and attitudes put subtle pressure on you, even hindering you from speaking the truth or doing what is right (Whybray, 169 – 70). Release from such bondage comes when people put their faith in the Lord alone (see 10:27;12:2; and the example of the apostles in Ac 5:29).

26 *Justice, from God.* True justice ultimately comes from God.The contrast is between seeking the face (grace) of a ruler and finding justice from the Lord.The great miscalculation is to assume that true justice depends on some ruler and that supplication must be directed first to him. Toy, 515, writes, “Proverbs deplores immoral (cringing or corrupt) reliances on human (especially political) power.”

27 *Character traits, hatred.* The righteous and the wicked detest the lifestyles of each other.The righteous detest the dishonest, and the wicked detest those who try to live uprightly.

NOTE

11 The clause וְחָכָם בְּאָחוֹר יְשַׁבְּחֶנָּה (*wᵉḥākām bᵉʾāḥôr yᵉšabbᵉḥennâ*) v.20) reads literally, "but a wise man stills it back." Because ,*ʾāḥôr* v.20)does not fit well with the verb, most commentators offer some change.Toy, 510, reads "anger" for "back" and translates the verb "restrain" after the LXX (which has "has self-control"). The idea of "keeps it back" (implied in the line; cf. NIV) and "stills it" is a possible interpretation.

VII. THE WORDS OF AGUR (30:1 – 33)

A. The Title (30:1)

1 The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh — an oracle:
This man declared to Ithiel,
to Ithiel and to Ucal:

COMMENTARY

1 The heading for this section identifies the words that follow as those of Agur, the son of Jakeh, for Ithiel and Ucal. Many have tried to interpret these names. They have been translated as appellatives (Vulg., assembler = teacher) or interpreted as sentences, such as, "I am weary, O God, I am weary, O God, and faint" (see NIV margin), or, "I am not a God, I am not a God that I should have power" (C. C. Torrey, "Proverbs Chapter 30,"*JBL* 73 [1954]: 93 – 96). Or they have been taken as names of unknown sages in Solomon's time (as there were others; see 1Ki 4:30 – 31). A Jewish midrash attempts to credit the section to Solomon through a clever but contrived etymology: "Agur is really Solomon because the latter girt his loins (*ogar*) with wisdom; he is called Bin Jakeh because he was free (*noki*) from sin; and the words, the burden, are added because he bore the yoke of God" (Plaut, 299, summarizing *Midr. Mishle*).

Most likely someone other than Solomon wrote these sayings; they have a different, almost nonpro-verbial, tone to them. For the unity of the section, see Paul Franklyn, “The Sayings of Agur in Proverbs 30: Piety or Scepticism,” *ZAW* 95 (1983): 239 – 52.

The section is also titled a “burden” or “oracle” (*hammaśśā*ʾ) v.20). It is possible that Massa is a place; the idea of a “burden” normally describes a prophetic oracle of some kind (see GK 5362 – 3564).

This heading may not represent all the contents of ch. 30: there is much diversity in the chapter, and the arrangement differs somewhat between the LXX and the MT. Nonetheless, the heading ascribes most, if not all, the passages to one Agur.

B. Agur’s Confession and Petition (30:2 – 9)

1. Confession of Ignorance (30:2 – 4)

2 “I am the most ignorant of men;
I do not have a man’s understanding.
3 I have not learned wisdom,
nor have I knowledge of the Holy One.
4 Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered up the wind in the hollow of his hands?
Who has wrapped up the waters in his cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is his name, and the name of his son?
Tell me if you know!

COMMENTARY

2 – 3 Agur confesses that he is ignorant of the ways of God. He begins by lamenting that he has not learned wisdom, i.e., that he is not one of those who profess to understand the Holy One. (Toy, 521, thinks this statement is a bit sarcastic.) “Ignorant” refers to intellectual dullness; this person feels like the lower animals (Pss 49:10 – 12; 73:22). The “Holy One” in this section is in the

plural (qᵉdōšîm), v.20)as in 9:10.

4 To make his point Agur includes five questions, which, like Job 38 – 41 and Proverbs 8:24 – 29, focus on divine acts to show that it is absurd for mortals to think that they can explain God's works or to compare themselves with God. These questions display human's limitations; they may have a sarcastic tone, implying that some people think they understand the phenomena of the universe.

The first question, accordingly, could refer to a human ("Who has gone up to heaven?") but may simply refer to God, as the other questions do. The final question seeks to identify this sovereign God.To know a person's name is to exhibit power over and closeness to him. The parallel reference to "son" was identified as "Israel' in some Jewish writings, in other places as the demiurge, the Logos, or as a simple poetic parallel for "his name." Chris tian interpreters have seen here a reference to the Son of God (a subtle anticipation of the full revelation in the NT).

2. Affirmation of the Reliability of God's Word (30:5 – 6)

5 "Every word of God is flawless;
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
6 Do not add to his words,
or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar.

COMMENTARY

5 Agur affirms that God's word is pure (ṣᵉrûpâ; v.20)"flawless," NIV). The point of the predicate, used elsewhere of purifying metal, is that God's word is trustworthy; there is nothing deceitful or false in it.The second half of the verse explains this meaning; it is safe to take refuge in the Lord (see Pss 12:6; 18:31).

6 This confidence is followed by a warning not to add to the Lord's words (see Dt 4:2), such adding being a tendency that is all too common. Humanity's danger lies in conceit and the self-ascription of divinity (Plaut, 300).

3. Prayer (30:7 – 9)

7 “Two things I ask of you, O LORD;
do not refuse me before I die:
8 Keep falsehood and lies far from me;
give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.
9 Otherwise, I may have too much
and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

COMMENTARY

7 – 9 Agur prays that God will prevent him from becoming deceitful (v.8a) and self-sufficient (vv.8b – 9). He wants to be honest in all his dealings, and he wants a life of balanced material blessings.He reasons that if he has too much, he may become independent of God (see Dt 8:11 – 14); and if he has too little, he may steal and thus profane God’s name.

Thus, acknowledging his own ignorance, relying on God’s word for security in life, and praying that God will keep him from falling into temptation, Agur is ready to offer his words.

C. The Admonition of Agur (30:10 – 33)

1. Noninterference in Domestic Situations (30:10)

10 “Do not slander a servant to his master,
or he will curse you, and you will pay for it.

COMMENTARY

10 The advice here is literally “not to slander”(*ʾal-talšēn*) v.20)a servant to his master,“lest he curse you”(*pen-yᵉqallelkā*) v.20) and “you pay for it” (*wᵉʾāšāmtā*) v.20).The verse is not clear on first reading. The verb *lašman* (lit., “wag the tongue”) means “defame,” i.e., “slander,” if the charge is untrue. Toy, 525, suggests that the warning is not limited to slaves. The warning could be taken literally: Do not

slander a servant to his master; for if it is not true, then he will make you look small (for this sense of *qal*m*al* see McKane, 650), and you will be found guilty (ʾāšām); v.20) if you are not guilty, then the curse will have no effect.

Another view is that the verse refers to the delivery of a fugitive slave to his master (Green-stone, 319). “Slander” in this case would refer to denouncing, i.e., accusing to authorities (see Dt 23:15 – 16).The advice then is not to meddle in the affairs of someone else.

2. Four Evil Things (30:11 – 14)

11 “There are those who curse their fathers
and do not bless their mothers;
12 those who are pure in their own eyes
and yet are not cleansed of their fi lth;
13 those whose eyes are ever so haughty,
whose glances are so disdainful;
14 those whose teeth are swords
and whose jaws are set with knives
to devour the poor from the earth,
the needy from among mankind.

COMMENTARY

Possibly there was a heading for this section at one time (“Three things, yea four . . .”).All the things listed here begin with the word *dôr* (“generation,”GK 1887, meaning a class or group of people; see also Mt 11:16).

11 *Disrespect for parents.* The first observation is that there is a segment of society that lacks respect for parents, in spite of the law (cf. Ex 21:17; Pr 20:20). In the parallelism the negative (lō᾽ yᶜbārēk, v.20) “do not bless”) follows the positive (yᶜqallēl, v.20) “who curse”); “cursing” a parent could refer to defaming, treating lightly, or showing disrespect in general.

12 *Self-righ teous ness.* These are they who are “pure” (ṭāhôr) v.20) but are “not cleansed” (lō᾽ ruḥāṣ) v.20) from their “filth” (ṣō᾽â). v.20). “Filth” often refers to physical uncleanness, but here it is moral defilement (cf. Isa 36:12; Zec 3:3 – 4).

There is a group of people who may observe all outer ritual but pay no attention to inner cleansing (see Isa 1:16; Mt 23:27). Such hypocrisy is harmful in every walk of life.

13 *Pride.* The eyes of the proud are "high" (*rāmû*; v.20);"haughty," NIV) and their eyelids "disdainful." These expressions refer to their arrogant attitude — the lofty view of themselves and the corresponding contempt for others (see also 6:17; Ps 131:1).

14 *Oppressing the poor.* The imagery of the first half of the verse captures the rapacity of the power of this group of people — their teeth and their jaws are swords and knives.The second part explains that they devour, like a ravenous and insensitive beast, the poor and the needy (see 31:8 – 9). Those who exploit and destroy other people are beasts.

3. Insatiable Things (30:15 – 16)

15 "The leech has two daughters.
'Give! Give!' they cry.
"There are three things that are never satisfied,
four that never say, 'Enough!':
16 the grave, the barren womb, land,
which is never satisfi ed with water,
and fire, which never says, 'Enough!'

15a Things that seem never to be satisfied are problematic for the normal enjoyment of life. The meaning of v.15a and its relationship to vv.15b – 16 has been debated. The "leech" is the symbol of greed because it sucks blood through its two suckers (here called its "two daughters" who cry "Give!Give! [*hab hab*]"). Various attempts to identify the two daughters have been made, but none of them is satisfactory. The Zohar describes a dog in Gehenna that barks, "*Hab, hab*." J. J. Gluck suggests that what is in view is erotic passion (and not the leech) with its two maidens of burning desire crying out for more ("Proverbs 30:15a," *VT* 14 [1964]: 367 – 70).F. S. North rightly criticizes this view as gratuitous;he argues for the view that a leech with two suckers is what is intended ("The Four Insatiables," *VT* 15 [1965]: 281 – 82).

15b – 16 There probably is a relationship in the numbering between v.15a and vv.15b – 16: two daughters, three insatiable things, and four things that never say

enough (see Roth, “Numerical Sequence,” 300 – 11; “Numerical Sayings,” 86). McKane, 656, suggests that the series builds to the climax, that the focus of attention is on the barren woman, and that insatiable death, the thirsty land, and the greedy fire are all metaphors of her sexual desire. But this proposal is not convincing.

The four insatiable things are then listed: *s*H*e*,*ôl* (“Sheol”; the “grave,” NIV), the abode of the dead (see also 27:20); the barren womb (*ʿōṣer rāḥam*, v.20), lit., “the closing of the womb”) of one whose desire for children is all-consuming (see Ge 16:2; 30:1); land that is not satisfied with water; and fire that continues until it burns itself out.

There is no clearly stated ethical lesson; the verses merely list basic observations of life. But one point that could be made is that greed, symbolized by the leech, is as insatiable as these other things.

4. Punishment for Parental Disrespect (30:17)

17 “The eye that mocks a father,
that scorns obedience to a mother,
will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley,
will be eaten by the vultures.

COMMENTARY

17 Severe punishment awaits those who show disrespect for their parents.The sentence focuses on the “eye” that “mocks” (*tiḵ·ag*) v.20) a father and despises or “scorns” (*tā·bûz*) v.20) obedience to a mother (see Note).The point is that the eye manifests the inner heart attitude, so the contemptuous look runs deep.The punishment is talionic; the eye that mocks will be pecked out by the birds. By these images the sternest punishment is held out for one who holds one’s parents in such contempt.

NOTE

17 "Obedience" is לִיקְּחַת (*liqqᵉhat*) v.20) used only here and in Genesis 49:10. Toy, 530, makes a change to *leziqnat*, thus reading, "the old age of the mother." The LXX's *ger*m*as* suggests that a root *lhq* had something to do with "white hair." D. Winton Thomas ("A Note on לִיקְּחַת v.20) in Proverbs 30:17," *JTS* 42 [1941]: 154 – 55) suggests a form of לְהָקֵל or לְהָקֵל; v.20) so *lhyqt* was corrupted to *lyqht*. It would read, "The eye that mocks a father and despises an aged mother."

5. Amazing Things in Nature (30:18 – 19)

18 "There are three things that are too amazing for me,
four that I do not understand:
19 the way of an eagle in the sky,
the way of a snake on a rock,
the way of a ship on the high seas,
and the way of a man with a maiden.

COMMENTARY

18 – 19 Many things in nature are amazing but incomprehensible. This little observation also begins with the numerical formula,"There are three things that are too amazing [*niplᵉʾôṯ*] v.20) for me, four that I do not understand [*lōʾ yᵉdaʿtîm*]. v.20)." The verb "amazing"(*pālēʾ*) v.20) basically describes what is wonderful, surpassing, incomprehensible (cf. Ge 18:14; Jdg 13:18;Ps 139:6; Isa 9:6[5]). The sage can only admire the wonders of nature; he is at a loss to explain it all.

It is not easy to discover what the four things have in common. They all are linked by the use of the word "way" (*derek*,"course of action"; GK 2006) and by a sense of mystery in each area. Suggestions for a common theme include the following: all four things are hidden from continued observation, for they are there in majestic form and then are gone, not leaving a trace; they all have a mysterious means of propulsion or motivation; they all describe the movement of one thing within the sphere or domain of another; or the first three serve as illustrations of the fourth and greatest wonder — it concerns human relations and is slightly different from the first three. Whybray, 177, observes that if the author intended to be mysterious and keep us guessing, he has certainly succeeded.

The first entry is the way of the eagle in the sky, a marvelous creature soaring

with apparent ease but certain determination and purpose, all hidden from the observer. Next is the way of the serpent on a rock. Here is the mysterious but smooth and efficient movement of a reptile without feet. The way of a ship in the sea portrays the magnificent movement of a vessel through a trackless sea. All these phenomena are marvelous to observe; they focus our attention on the majestic and mysterious movements in the sky, on the land, and on the sea.

The fourth mystery is “the way of a man with a maiden.”The term ʿalmâ v.20) (“maiden”; GK 6625) does not in and of itself mean “virgin” but rather describes a young woman who is sexually ready for marriage. In view here is the wonder of human sexuality, for the preposition *be* suggests that the “way of a man”is either “with” or “in” the ʿalmâ v.20). This mystery might begin with the manner of obtaining the love of the woman but focuses on the most intimate part of human relationships. So the most intimate moments of love are at the heart of what the sage considers to be wonderful. All of it is part of God’s marvelous plan for his creation and therefore can be fully enjoyed and appreciated without fully comprehending it.

NOTE

19 For an alternative view, see Gregorio Del Olmo Lete, “Nota Sobre Prov 30:19,” *Bib* 67 (1986): 68 – 74. He takes עַלְמָה (ʿalmâ) v.20) as “darkness” and reads, “the way of the courageous man in the dark.”

6. The Brazen Woman (30:20)

20 “This is the way of an adulteress:
She eats and wipes her mouth
and says, ‘I’ve done nothing wrong.’

COMMENTARY

20 Equally amazing is the insensitivity of the adulteress to sin. That this verse was placed here lends support to the idea that the previous verse is focusing on sexual intimacy in marriage; for just as that encounter is incomprehensible (filling one with wonder), so is the way that human nature has distorted and ruined it.

Carrying forward the use of *derek* (“way”), the verse describes “the way of an adulteress.” She is ,אֵשֶׁת מְנָאֲפִים she may be married but certainly is unchaste.The portrayal is one of an amoral woman more than an immoral one (McKane, 658). Kidner, 180, notes that the act of adultery is as unremarkable to her as a meal. The imagery of eating and wiping her mouth is euphemistic for sexual activity (see 9:17). It is incredible that human beings can engage in sin and then so easily dismiss any sense of guilt or responsibility, perhaps by rationalizing the deeds or perhaps through a calloused indifference to what the will of the Lord is for sexuality.

7. Abuse of Position (30:21 – 23)

21 “Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up:
22 a servant who becomes king,

a fool who is full of food,
23 an unloved woman who is married,
and a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

COMMENTARY

21 – 23 Certain people who are suddenly elevated in their status in life can be unbearable. The sage says that under these things the earth trembles and cannot bear it (v.21) — obviously using humorous or satirical hyperbole to say that these changes shake up the order of life. This observation assumes that the elevated status was not accompanied by a change of nature.

For example, it was not uncommon for a servant to become a king in the ancient Near East (v.22).Possibly once he became king, he would develop the mentality and disposition of a king and perhaps be better than the preceding ruler. But the “earth trembles” when a servant is king; unaccustomed to such dignity, he might become a power-hungry tyrant and oppressive ruler (Greenstone, 324, suggests the example of Hitler).

The second, a fool who is full of food, describes a fool who becomes prosperous but continues to be boorish and irreligious. But now he is overbearing and, worse yet, finds time hanging heavy on his hands.

The third is the unloved woman who gets married (v.23). Perhaps she is unattractive or odious, but also perhaps she is married to someone incapable of showing love. Being unloved, not sought or wooed, she is actually hated (see Ge 29:31, 33).

The fourth is the maid who displaces her mistress.The tension from the threat of Hagar in Genesis 16:5 and 21:10 shows how unbearable this situation could be. Such upheavals in the proper order of things make life intolerable.

8. Wisdom the Key to Success (30:24 – 28)

24 “Four things on earth are small,
yet they are extremely wise:

25 Ants are creatures of little strength,
yet they store up their food in the summer;
26 coneys are creatures of little power,
yet they make their home in the crags;
27 locusts have no king,
yet they advance together in ranks;
28 a lizard can be caught with the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces.

COMMENTARY

24 – 28 These verses focus on four things that are small but "extremely wise" (*ḥᵉkāmîm mᵉḥukkāmîm*):ants, rock badgers, locusts, and lizards. The wisdom exhibited by the ants concerns their forethought and organization to make provision for food; the wisdom of the rock badgers ("coneys," NIV) is found in their ingenuity to find a place of security;the wisdom of the locust consists in its cooperation and order, which when massed in military division becomes a force for humans to reckon with (see Thomas, "Notes on Some Passages," 271 – 79); and the wisdom of the lizard is in its elusiveness and boldness. (For a survey of lessons from nature, see S. P. Toperoff, "The Ant in the Bible and Midrash," *Dor le Dor* 13 [1985]: 179 – 83.) In God's creation wisdom manifests itself in a variety of ways, and humans can learn the value of wisdom over size and numerical strength.

9. Leadership Qualities (30:29 – 31)

29 "There are three things that are stately in their stride,
four that move with stately bearing:
30 a lion, mighty among beasts,
who retreats before nothing;
31 a strutting rooster, a he-goat,
and a king with his army around him.

COMMENTARY

29 – 31 Leaders exhibit majestic qualities. There is a simple point to this observation: three things are "stately in their stride" (*mēṭîbê ṣāʿad*), four that move with "stately being" (*mēṭîbê lāket*). Three examples come from the animal world, leading up

to the fourth, the king, who has his army about him to defend against revolt (see Note).

NOTE

31 Waltke, 2:462, suggests that the simplest understanding of the expression is to take אַל (*ʾāl*) as the negative "not" and קָם (*qām*) as "to rise up," thus giving the idea of a king whom no one dares resist.The text has אֶלְקוֹם עִמּוֹ (*ʾalqôm ʿimmô*,"with his army around him"), which has been emended to read ʿ*immô lōʾ qām* ("against whom there is no rising up") or *qām ʾel ʿammô*("standing over his people"; Driver, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs," 194). The LXX has "a king haranguing his people." While a slight change makes it a little easier to offer a translation, the exact meaning is far from certain. The point must focus on the stately appearance of the king.

10. A Final Admonition (30:32 – 33)

32 "If you have played the fool and exalted yourself,
or if you have planned evil,
clap your hand over your mouth!
33 For as churning the milk produces butter,
and as twisting the nose produces blood,
so stirring up anger produces strife."

COMMENTARY

32 – 33 The sage advises those who have "exalted" themselves and "played the fool" and those who have "planned deception" to cease their efforts and control what they say, viz., "clap your hand over our mouth!" (*yād ʾpeh*;cf. Job 40:4 – 5).The explanation for this warning is that talking about these things only causes strife.

Two similes are used in the last verse — churning the milk and twisting the nose. Both involve a pressing, the first producing butter from milk and the second drawing blood from the nose. In the same way stirring up anger (through pride and evil planning) produces "strife" (*rîb*). There is also a subtle wordplay here, for "nose" (*ʾap*) is related to "anger" (*ʾappayim*). So the intent of this concluding advice is to strive for peace and harmony through humility and righteousness.

VIII. THE WORDS OF LEMUEL (31:1 – 9)

A. Title: The Words Taught to Lemuel by His Mother (31:1)

1 The sayings of King Lemuel — an oracle his mother taught him:

COMMENTARY

1 Nothing is known about King Lemuel. The same question of translation occurs here with מַשָּׂא that occurred in 30:1, whether it means "oracle" or refers to a place called "Massa" (see GK 5362 – 3564). Jewish legend identifies Lemuel as Solomon and the advice as from Bathsheba from a time when Solomon indulged in magic with his Egyptian wife and delayed the morning sacrifices (see Greenstone, 329). But there is no evidence for these assumptions.

This passage is the only direct address to a king in Proverbs, though such addressing was the norm in the wisdom literature of other ancient countries (see Leah Leila Brunner, "King and Commoner in Proverbs and Near Eastern Sources," *Dor le Dor* 10 [1982]: 210 – 19, 259; Brunner shows that the advice is religious and not secular). The instruction includes two warnings and then sound advice.

B. First Warning (31:2 – 3)

2 "O my son, O son of my womb,
O son of my vows,
3 do not spend your strength on women,
your vigor on those who ruin kings.

COMMENTARY

2 – 3 The king is warned not to spend his strength on sensual lust. The

repetition of “son”shows the seriousness of the warning; and the twofold motivation adds to this impact — he is her son, and she has vowed him (cf. 1Sa 1:11; see F. Deist, “Prov. 31:1, A Use of Constant Mistranslation,”*JNSL* 6 [1978]: 1 – 3; Deist argues that “son of my womb” should be “own son”). She advises him not to spend “your strength” (*ḥêlekā*) or “your ways” (*dᵉrākeykā*) on women. The term *derek* (“vigor,” NIV; GK 2006) may allude to sexual intercourse (see 30:19) or in general refer to the heart’s affection or attention (Toy, 540).

“Women” in this passage are qualified as those who “ruin” (*lamḥôt*) kings. Commentators note that this difficult term is close to an Aramaic word for concubine (see Greenstone, 330) and an Arabic word that is an indelicate description of women.Whatever the precise meaning, the point of the verse is that while it would be easy for a king to spend his time and energy enjoying women, doing so would be unwise.

C. Second Warning (31:4 – 7)

4 “It is not for kings, O Lemuel —
not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer,
5 lest they drink and forget what the law decrees,
and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.
6 Give beer to those who are perishing,
wine to those who are in anguish;
7 let them drink and forget their poverty
and remember their misery no more.

COMMENTARY

4 – 7 Drinking wine and craving beer is not for kings. If this literally prohibits any use of such drinks, it would be unheard of in the ancient courts.Either excessive use of alcohol or troubling need for it (reflecting deeper problems) is what is meant.The danger, of course, would be to cloud the mind and thus deprive the oppressed of true justice.

Verses 6 – 7 explain that a better use for strong drink is to relieve bodily suffering and mental distress. People in those conditions need to forget.

D. Instruction: Defend the Defenseless (31:8 – 9)

8 “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.
9 Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

COMMENTARY

8 – 9 The king is to open his mouth (*pᵉtaḥ-pîkā*, i.e., “speak up for”) those who are dumb (*ʾillēm*, probably signifying “those who cannot speak for themselves”). It is the responsibility of the king to champion the rights of the poor and the needy, those who are left desolate by the cruelties of life (see 2Sa 14:4 – 11; 1Ki 3:16 – 28; Pss 45:3 – 5; 72:4; Isa 9:6 – 7).

IX. THE WIFE OF NOBLE CHARACTER (31:10 – 31)

OVERVIEW

The book of Proverbs comes to a close with the addition of this poem about the woman of valor.A careful reading of the passage shows that her value is derived from her character of godly wisdom, which is beneficial to her family and to the community as a whole. Traditionally, this poem was recited by husbands and children at the Sabbath table on Friday night (see Y. Levin, “ ‘The Woman of Valor’ in Jewish Ritual [Prov. 31:10 – 31],” *Beth Mikra* 31 [1985/86]: 339 – 47). Christians, too, have seen it as a paradigm for godly women.

The theme of the poem, the wife of noble character, captures the ideals of wisdom that have filled the book (see T. P. McCreesh, “Wisdom as Wife: Proverbs 31:10 – 31,” *RB* 92 [1985]: 25 – 46). It may well be that this passage sums up more the point of the composition than merely portraying the ideal wife. The woman here presented is a wealthy aristocrat who runs a household estate

with servants and conducts business affairs — real estate, vineyards, and merchandise — domestic affairs, and charity. It would be quite a task for any woman to emulate this pattern.

Camp describes the woman as an idealized wife in an ideal home in an ideal society; she is not just some man's dream woman but represents a universal type of woman (Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* [Sheffield: JSOT, 1985], 92 – 93; see also Andrea Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbs* [Paris: LeCoffre, 1964], 233). Others have also recognized that more is going on here than a description of the ideal wife or instructions for the bride-to-be (that parallel the instructions for the young man in the book). Kidner, 184, allows that "this lady's standard is not implied to be in reach of all" but rather reveals the flowering of wisdom in domestic life. Kenneth Aitken (*Proverbs* [Philadel-phia: Westminster, 1986], 158) likewise affirms that "as a whole it cannot be read as a kind of blueprint of the ideal Israelite housewife, either for men to measure their wives against or for their wives to try to live up to." Moreover, the work says nothing about the woman's personal relationship with her husband, her intellectual or emotional strengths, or her religious activities.

In general it appears that the woman of Proverbs 31 is a symbol of wisdom (see E. Jacob, "Sagesse et Alphabet: Pr. 31:10 – 31," in *Hommages à ´ ADupont-Sommer* [ed. A. Caquot and M. Philonenko; n.p.: Adrien – Maisonneuve, 1971], 287 – 95). If this is so, then the poem plays an important part in the personification of wisdom in ancient Near Eastern literature. Indeed, many commentators correctly invite a contrast to the earlier portrayals of Dame Folly lurking dangerously in the streets — she was to be avoided — and Lady Wisdom, who is to be embraced. The Lady Wisdom in this chapter stands in the strongest contrast to the adulterous woman in the earlier chapters.

Several characteristics of this poem should be noted in order to appreciate its impact on the teaching of wisdom. (On this subject see Murray H. Lichtenstein, "Chiasm and Symmetry in Proverbs 31," *CBQ* 44 [1982]: 202 – 11.) First, the entire poem is arranged alphabetically (a pattern known as "acrostic"). This arrangement means that the first word of each line begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in sequence. Most commentators recognize that such a pattern makes the work uneven and somewhat random in its organization.Nevertheless, this arrangement made memorization easier and perhaps also served to organize the thoughts. We may say, then, that the poem is an organized arrangement of the

virtues of the wise wife — the ABCs of wisdom.

Second, the passage has striking similarities with hymns (see Al Wolters, "Sôpiyyâ [Prov. 31:27] as Hymnic Participle and Play on Sophia," *JBL* 104 [1985]: 577 – 87). Usually a hymn is written to God, but here apparently it was written to the wife of noble character. A comparison with Psalm 111, a hymn to God, illustrates some of the similarities.

- The psalm begins with hal^lû yâ ("Hallelu Yah" [NIV margin], or "Praise the LORD";Ps 111:1); this phrase is reflected in Proverbs 31:31, which says, "Her works bring her praise [wehal^lûhâ]."
- Psalm 111:2 speaks of God's works; Proverbs 31:13 speaks of the wise woman's works.
- Psalm 111:2 says that the works of the Lord are searched or "pondered" (d^rûšîm); Proverbs 31:13 says that the woman "selects" (dâr^šâ) wool and flax.
- Psalm 111:3 says that the Lord's work is honorable (hâdâr; "majestic," NIV); Proverbs 31:25 ascribes strength and "dignity" (hâdâr; to the woman.
- Psalm 111:4 says that the Lord is gracious and full of compassion (raḥûm); Proverbs 31:26 ascribes the law of compassion or kindness (ḥesed) to the woman.
- Psalm 111:5 says that the Lord gives "food" (ṭerep); Proverbs 31:15 says that the woman provides "food" (ṭerep); for her house.
- Psalm 111:10 says that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom — the motto of Proverbs; Proverbs 31:30 describes the woman as fearing the Lord.
- Psalm 111:10 says that the Lord's praise will endure; Proverbs 31:31 says that the woman will be praised for her works.

It is clear that Proverbs 31 is patterned after the hymn in order to extol the works of wisdom.

Third, the passage has similarities with heroic literature. The vocabulary and the expressions in general have the ring of an ode to a champion.For example, "woman of valor" ('ešet-ḥayil in v.10;"woman of noble character," NIV) is the same expression one would find in Judges for the "mighty man of valor" (gibbôr ḥeḥayil [Jdg 6:12]; "mighty warrior," NIV) — the warrior aristocrat; "strength" ('ôz in v.17 ["vigorously," NIV], 25) is elsewhere used for powerful deeds and heroics (e.g., Ex 15:2, 13; 1Sa 2:10); "value" (v.11) in "lacks nothing of value" is actually the word for "plunder" (šâlâl, as used in the name "Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz" in Isa 8:1,

3; cf. NIV margin); “food” (v.15) is actually “prey” (*teref*); “she holds” (*šillaḥ* in v.19) is an expression also used in military settings (cf. Jdg 5:26, “reached for,” for Jael’s smiting Sisera); “surpass them all” (v.29) is an expression that signifies victory.

Putting these observations together, one can conclude that Proverbs 31:10 – 31 is like a hymn to Lady Wisdom written in the heroic mode.Wisdom is personified as a woman because the word “wisdom” is a feminine noun and naturally suggests it, and because the woman is an excellent example of wisdom by virtue of the variety of applications it receives — at home, in the market, with charity, in business.

There are several reasons why the writer would use these literary features to present his description of wisdom: (1) a personification of wisdom allows the writer to make all the lessons concrete and not abstract (we can see them in action in everyday life); (2) it provides a polemic against the literature of the ancient world that saw women as merely decorative — charm and beauty without substance;(3) and it depicts the greater heroism as moral and domestic rather than militaristic. But the personification in this chapter differs from earlier personifications in the book in exactly these practical details that describe the noble woman. There is no reason to doubt that the writer has a historical person in mind when constructing the poem. From the way the poem is written, one must conclude that even if it is symbolic, it is nonetheless real. The noble woman, then, becomes a role model of wisdom for all who read the poem.

The poem certainly presents a pattern for women who want to develop a life of wisdom; but since it is essentially about wisdom, its lessons are for both men and women to follow. The passage teaches that the fear of the Lord will inspire people to be faithful stewards of the time and talents God has given; that wisdom is productive and beneficial for others and requires great industry in life’s endeavors; that wisdom is best taught and lived in the home — indeed, the success of the home demands wisdom; and that wisdom is balanced living that gives attention to domestic responsibilities as well as business enterprises and charitable service.

The poem can be arranged into eight stanzas; this arrangement generally follows Toy, 542 – 48, albeit without the rearrangement of some of the verses.

A. Praise in General (31:10 – 12)

10 A wife of noble character who can find?
She is worth far more than rubies.
11 Her husband has full confidence in her
and lacks nothing of value.
12 She brings him good, not harm,
all the days of her life.

COMMENTARY

10 The introductory rhetorical question establishes the point that the wife of noble character is not easily found; but when she is, she is a treasure. Her description as "a wife of noble character" (*ʾēšet-ḥayil*) signifies that she possesses all the virtues, honor, and strength to do the things the poem will set forth. It is interesting to notice that this woman, like wisdom, is worth more than rubies (cf.3:15; 8:11).

11 – 12 The noble woman's husband lacks nothing of value. The term *šālāl* ("value"; v.11) usually means "plunder"; the point may be that the gain will be as rich and bountiful as the spoils of war. The capable woman inspires the confidence of her husband because in her business and domestic enterprises she proves able (v.12; cf. 1Sa 24:2). In any marriage, but especially when a large household is involved, such trust in the wife's abilities is essential.

B. Industrial Pursuits of the Household (31:13 – 15)

13 She selects wool and flax
and works with eager hands.
14 She is like the merchant ships,
bringing her food from afar.
15 She gets up while it is still dark;
she provides food for her family
and portions for her servant girls.

COMMENTARY

13 – 15 Now the cataloging of activities begins.The picture presented is of a large household that requires supervision. All indicators suggest that it is a wealthy and honorable household. This noble woman takes the responsibility to see that food and clothing are provided; she makes the choices, works with her hands, and ensures that the food for the day will be there. The simile with the merchant ships suggests that she brings a continual supply of abundance.

C. Financial Enterprise (31:16 – 18)

16 She considers a field and buys it;
out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.
17 She sets about her work vigorously;
her arms are strong for her tasks.
18 She sees that her trading is profitable,
and her lamp does not go out at night.

COMMENTARY

16 – 18 This part of the account portrays the noble wife as a shrewd businesswoman who makes wise investments from her earnings. There is no foolish purchasing or indebtedness here. Verse 17 literally says that she “girds her loins with strength” — she is a vigorous and tireless worker, for girding is an expression for preparation for serious work. Consequently she learns by experience that her efforts are profitable. The last line of v.18 may simply mean that she burns the midnight oil in following through a business opportunity (McKane, 668), though it may signify that her house flourishes without calamity (cf. Job 18:6;Jer 25:10).

D. Provision for the Family and the Poor (31:19 – 21)

19 In her hand she holds the distaff
and grasps the spindle with her fingers.
20 She opens her arms to the poor
and extends her hands to the needy.

21 When it snows, she has no fear for her household;
for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

COMMENTARY

19 Verse 19 focuses on the domestic activity of spinning: the “distaff ” is the straight rod, and the “spindle” is the round or circular part. She “stretches out” (“holds,” NIV) her hand to the work to provide clothing.

20 The noble wife also provides for the poor.The text literally says that she “opens her palm” to the poor; i.e, she gives to the poor with liberality (Ps 112:9). This was the hand that was diligently at work in the previous verse with an acquired skill; it is not the hand of a lazy, wealthy woman. She uses her industry in charitable ways.

21 Moreover, the noble wife is well prepared for the future. When faced with cold, her family has warm clothes to wear. The word “scarlet” can be read also as “two cloaks,” suggesting double garments for warmth (see Note).

NOTE

21 For the MT's שָׁנִים (*šānîm,* "scarlet"), the LXX and the Vulgate read שְׁנַיִם (*šenāyim,* "two" or "double") and hence render "a double garment," having *šnāyim*in pause with the word that follows,מַרְבַּדִּים (*marbaddîm,*"cover"). The question asked is whether scarlet would keep one as warm as a "double garment."

E. Distinction by Industry (31:22 – 24)

22 She makes coverings for her bed;
she is clothed in fine linen and purple.
23 Her husband is respected at the city gate,
where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.
24 She makes linen garments and sells them,
and supplies the merchants with sashes.

COMMENTARY

22 The word rendered "coverings" (*marbaddîm*) appears also in 7:16, where it is rendered "covered."Delitzsch, 2:335, suggests "pillows" or "mattresses."The LXX, bringing over the word *šānîm*("scarlet,"NIV; but see note on v.21), renders "lined overcoats," thus harmonizing with the second part of the verse, which clearly has attire in view.

The noble woman's clothing is "fine linen and purple," i.e., costly and luxurious. Garments dyed with purple indicated wealth and high rank (cf. Ex 25 – 37, passim; SS 3:10). One is reminded of the rich man in Luke 16:19, who was also clothed in purple and fine linen. The problem was not with the clothing he wore but his lack of charity.

23 The woman's husband was important. The "gate" was the place of the assembly of the elders who had judicial responsibilities (Ru 4:1 – 12).The man was a prominent, well-known leader. Toy, 546, suggests that "it is assumed by the people that the head of so well-ordered a household must be a worthy man."

24 The woman's industry finds expression in business. The poet did not think it strange or unworthy for a woman to engage in honest trade.In fact, from antiquity the weaving of fine linens was a common trade for women in Palestine.

F. Wisdom and Prosperity (31:25 – 27)

25 She is clothed with strength and dignity;
she can laugh at the days to come.
26 She speaks with wisdom,
and faithful instruction is on her tongue.
27 She watches over the affairs of her household
and does not eat the bread of idleness.

COMMENTARY

25 The noble wife is diligent and prudent in her work; her strength and honor come from her solid financial and economic position, as v.25b shows (Toy, 547); so the result is that she is confident in facing the future.

26 – 27 She is wise and gracious in her speech.She uses good, practical common sense in her discussions; and her instruction is reliable. The last phrase of v.26 literally says "law of kindness" (tôrat ḥesed)— kind and faithful instruction comes from her. Finally, the wife's supervision of the household is alert, as a watchman (v.27).

G. Merits Recognized (31:28 – 29)

28 Her children arise and call her blessed;
her husband also, and he praises her:
29 "Many women do noble things,
but you surpass them all."

COMMENTARY

28 The wisdom of the noble woman inspires praise from her family — from those who know her the best. Unfortunately, praise often comes from outside the home, from those who do not know the person very well. This woman is of such worth that her children "rise up" (qāmû) to praise her, an expression that describes an activity in preparation for such an utterance (see Ge 37:35 ["came," NIV]).

29 This woman surpasses all other women. These words are probably the praise of the husband, who speaks for the rest of the family.

H. Laudatory Summation (31:30 – 31)

30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting;
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
31 Give her the reward she has earned,
and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

COMMENTARY

30 These words could be the husband's but may better form the poet's summation of the matter. In any case, what is valued in the wife are her domestic efficiency and her piety rather than charm and beauty. Physical appearance is not necessarily dismissed — it simply does not endure as do those qualities produced by the fear of the Lord (see Note). Beauty is deceitful, and one who pursues beauty may well be disappointed by the character of the "beautiful" person.

31 Once again there is a reference to the city gate, where all manner of business was conducted. The woman's works bring her praise in her own right and not merely as an appendage of her husband (Toy, 549).With the emphasis on the "fear of the LORD"(cf. v.30) at the close of the book, Perowne, 193, observes, "Thus does Wisdom, true even to herself, return in her last utterance to her first (1:7), and place once again the crown on the head of the godly." Plaut, 315 – 16, concludes:

Let all know about this kind of woman who, in piety, in devotion and with skill and diligence builds her home. Here is the foundation of society as Judaism sees it; for in Hebrew, house and woman are often used synonymously. . . .Over both man and wife stands God in whose honor these proverbial collections were made and reverently placed into the Biblical canon, so that later generations might listen, learn, and live more richly.

NOTE

30 The LXX has συνετή (*synetē*, “intelligence”) in addition to “fears the LORD.”

ECCLESIASTES

JERRY E. SHEPHERD

Introduction

1. A Puzzling Book
2. Title
3. Authorship
4. Date
5. Setting
6. Text
7. Canonicity
8. Comparative Literature
9. Genre
10. Structure
11. Message and Purpose
12. Biblical-Theological Connections
13. Preaching and Teaching the Book of Ecclesiastes
14. Bibliography
15. Outline

1. A PUZZLING BOOK

"Anyone to whom the book of Ecclesiastes is not a puzzle has not yet read it." Thus the late David Hubbard began his popularly oriented study of Ecclesiastes.[1] His judgment is correct. The attempt to understand this book, which declares the futility of all human activity, becomes itself a demonstration of the declaration. Not just in minute details, such as the meaning of individual words, but even with regard to more sweeping interpretive concerns, such as the very purpose of the book, there are numerous issues on which there is no scholarly consensus. While every biblical book has its problems of interpretation, in Ecclesiastes those become particularly acute.

The book declares a particular frustration in the search for truth and wisdom, but it never comes to the point of recommending abandonment of the search. Nor should we. Though our attempt to interpret the book will necessarily result in understandings that are provisional and may, perhaps in measure, appear to render the attempts futile, the alternative — to fold our hands and do nothing —

comes under the more scathing condemnation of “foolish” (4:5). God speaks to us in this book, and though our apprehension of what is said may be faulty, the effort must be made. For as with all the books in the biblical canon, but perhaps even more acutely in Wisdom literature (Ecclesiastes included), the issues discussed are the issues of life and death.

2. TITLE

The English title, “Ecclesiastes,” is derived from the Latin Vulgate’s rendering of the Greek Septuagint’s title for the book, *ekklēsiastēs*. The Greek term refers to one who is a member or possibly convenor of a public assembly and thus reflects the translator’s understanding of the Hebrew title of the book, *qōheleṯ* (GK 7738).This Hebrew title is the same word as that rendered in 1:1 by the NIV as “Teacher” and by the NASB as “Preacher.”

Most commentators regard *qōheleṯ* as a feminine participle derived from the Hebrew verb *qāhal* (GK 7735), which means “to assemble, gather.” The use of the feminine participle carries no gender implications and appears to have been simply one way by which to form a noun referring to an occupation or office (i.e., “assembler, gatherer”; cf. Ezr 2:55, 57; Ne 7:57, 59, where the two names Hassophereth and Pokereth appear to be occupationally related). The term *qōheleṯ* occurs seven times in Ecclesiastes (1:1 – 2, 12; 7:27;12:8 – 10). The Septuagint’s *ekklēsiastēs*, because of its closeness to *ekklēsia*, “church,” gave rise to the conception and subsequent popularity of the idea that the office suggested was that of teacher or preacher.

Though it is fairly certain that *qōheleṯ* derives from the verb *qāhal* it is less clear just what this person gathers. The majority of commentators suppose that the reference is to a gathering of people, perhaps for instruction. Alternatively, some commentators suggest that it refers to the gathering of proverbs and sayings (cf. 12:9 – 10). In light of the close connection of the noun *qōheleṯ* to the verb *qāhal* and the noun *qāhal* (“assembly”), both of which are always used with reference to a gathering of people, the former alternative seems more likely.

Readers of commentaries and other literature on Ecclesiastes can become

somewhat confused because of the tendency by some authors to refer to the book by its Hebrew title, Qohelet. Because this commentary supports the idea that there are actually two voices in the book (see below under Authorship), it will, except for places where other authors are being quoted, consistently use the term "Ecclesiastes" to refer to the book and the term "Qohelet" to refer to the primary voice or speaker in the book.

3. AUTHORSHIP

For the greater part of the last two thousand years it was generally assumed that Solomon was Qohelet and was thus to be identified as the author of the book.The equation was an easy one to make for several reasons:

- Qohelet's denomination as king or ruler over Israel and Jerusalem (1:1, 12, 16)
- the reference to him as "son of David" (1:1)
- his declared resolve "to study and to explore by wisdom" (1:12), as well as the claim to have superior wisdom (1:16)
- references to his great wealth (2:4 – 10)
- the mention of his building projects (2:4 – 6)
- the reference to his harem (2:8)

All of these factors seemed to fit well with the narratives about Solomon in 1 Kings 1 – 11 and 2 Chronicles 1 – 9.

Over the course of the last two centuries, however, the Solomonic identification has been nearly completely abandoned. The primary reasons for this move are:

- the recognition that the Hebrew of the book is much later than that which would have come from the period of Solomon and the early monarchy
- Qohelet's claim in 1:16 to have increased in wisdom "more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me" (lit., "more than *all* who ruled," though David was the only king to have ruled in Jerusalem before Solomon; it is unlikely that this reference would be to the earlier Jebusite rulers of Jerusalem)
- the nonappearance of the name Solomon in the book, when his name had

already been attached to Proverbs and the Song of Songs

Today few scholars still maintain Solomonic authorship for Ecclesiastes. Probably the majority position through much of the last century has been that an Israelite sage wrote the book as a skeptical, pessimistic, wisdom treatise and adopted a Solomonic persona to give it a measure of authority. Then a second person added an introductory title (1:1) and epilogue (12:9 – 11) to the book. A third person added a second epilogue (12:12 – 14) as an orthodox corrective to make the book more acceptable.

In a groundbreaking article in 1976 titled "Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," Michael Fox argued that, as opposed to the idea that there was a second or third person who added an epilogue or epilogues to the book, Ecclesiastes is actually the work of one person. There are two voices in the book, but they both come from the same person. The epilogist is actually the creator of the character Qohelet and what that character says. To use Fox's own words, "it is not that the epilogue is by Qohelet, but that Qohelet is 'by' the epilogist."[2]For Fox, Qohelet is a persona created by the author of the book. Qohelet actually represents, in large part, the thought of the author, but in the epilogue (12:9 – 14) the author distances himself to a certain extent from the persona he has created.[3]

Tremper Longman has taken Fox's proposal and reworked it somewhat.[4]His thesis is that there are two voices in the book: that of Qohelet in 1:12 – 12:7 and that of a second sage, who provides a prologue in 1:1 – 11, an epilogue in 12:8 – 14, and also briefly interrupts at 7:27, in all three places referring to Qohelet in the third person. This second voice is, in essence, the author of the book. Longman is undecided with regard to Fox's position that Qohelet is a fictional, literary creation of the author, and he leaves open the possibility that Qohelet may have been a real person, assuming for the sake of the commentary that he is.

Additionally, Longman argues that "Qohelet's speech is a foil, a teaching device, used by the second wise man in order to instruct his son (12:12) concerning the dangers of speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel."[5]In 12:9 – 14 (see exposition), the epilogist distances himself from Qohelet and, though he praises him for his sagacity, criticizes him for incorporating into his teaching pessimistic, skeptical wisdom thought from the larger ancient Near Eastern environment.

In this commentary, I have adopted Longman's main thesis, but I have elsewhere argued that Qohelet is indeed a literary creation of the author, a persona behind which stands not only the figure of Solomon but also that of Hezekiah.[6] In chs. 1 – 2 Qohelet is painted with obvious Solomonic characteristics; but by not explicitly naming Qohelet as Solomon and by introducing conflicting data, such as the reference to "*all* those who ruled in Jerusalem before me" (1:16), the author wants the reader to look for another Israelite king who might also fit the portrait. Hezekiah, who in both biblical and rabbinical tradition has wisdom connections and who, in the accounts of his reign in 2 Kings 18 – 20, 2 Chronicles 29 – 32, and Isaiah 36 – 39, makes several statements that appear to parallel ones made by Qohelet in Ecclesiastes, is the likely candidate.[7]

Qohelet, then, is a composite character behind whom stand both Solomon and Hezekiah, the two bookends of the royal wisdom tradition in ancient Israel — two kings who, in spite of their connection to wisdom, made unwise decisions. Thus, in addition to Longman's thesis that the book is a warning against "speculative, doubting wisdom in Israel," I argue that the book also serves as a censure of the Davidic dynasty for allowing this pessimistic, skeptical teaching to stand alongside Torah and the instruction to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:13). See more on this approach under Message and Purpose.

4. DATE

The majority of scholars today assume a date for the book at approximately the middle of the third century BC. The arguments for this dating fall along three basic lines. (1) The language of Ecclesiastes is late, even moving toward, some would argue, a more Mishnaic Hebrew. (2) The suggested sociological setting for the book accords well with a date around 250 BC. (3) Much of the book's contents appears to show signs of Hellenistic philosophical influence.

Though analysis of a literary work's language may provide substantial clues for the dating of the work, studies on the language of Ecclesiastes done in the

last twenty years have come to different conclusions.[8] Fredericks, for example, arrives at an exilic or even preexilic dating, and Schoors, writing after Fredericks, argues for a later, postexilic though still pre-Hellenistic date. Conventional indicators of lateness, such as Aramaisms, loanwords, and so on, can also be explained in other ways. In some respects, the use of such indicators constitutes an argument from silence. One could always argue that a well-educated, and perhaps well-traveled, Israelite could pick up and utilize words from another language before there was a wholesale interchange between Israelite society and the nation of the current ruler on the block. There are a couple of Persian loanwords in Ecclesiastes, no certain Grecisms, and, according to Seow, no Mishnaic Hebrew features that could not be viewed as "literary deposits of popular speech" of which both Ecclesiastes and the later Mishnaic texts were common inheritors.[9] But Seow, noting that the Aramaisms seem to have a high frequency of occurrence, dates the book in the late fifth century to early fourth century BC.

Though some defend a sociological setting during the Hellenistic period, claiming that Qohelet belonged to the upper crust of society in a time of relative economic prosperity,[10] the evidence for this putative socioeconomic setting is meager. Seow, for example, has argued just as persuasively, if not more so, for a setting in the Persian period.[11] While there are, to be sure, some similarities between Greek philosophical thought and some of the content of Ecclesiastes, the connections are more extensive, better situated, and more easily explainable in terms of the rich heritage of the earlier Wisdom tradition in the ancient Near East.[12]

In sum, the only substantial evidence for dating appears to be the higher number of Aramaisms that occur in the book. Elsewhere, I have noted evidence in Ecclesiastes that the author was perhaps familiar with the Chronicler's account of the reign of Hezekiah.[13] If this is so, then a date in the fifth century BC, after the writing of 1 and 2 Chronicles, would appear to be the most probable date for the writing of this book.

5. SETTING

Biblical studies have become more and more interdisciplinary in the past decades. One discipline with which biblical scholars have been increasingly interacting is sociology. Commentaries, theologies, and histories of Israelite religion are now being written from sociological, or more precisely, from sociopolitical and socioeconomic perspectives.

The problem with many of these works, however, is that because of the paucity of hard data with respect to the sociological, economic, and even political conditions of ancient Israelite society, they actually become exercises in sociological reconstruction. The commentator tries to take clues from the text and match it up with the putative sociological reconstruction put forth in the commentary.Thus, as mentioned above, Ecclesiastes has been thought by some to fit the reconstructed conditions of Israelite society in the Hellenistic period, by others to fit the conditions of the Persian period, and by some scholars even been forced to find its home in the Maccabean period.

As Roland Murphy notes, however, such putative sociological settings are largely arguments from silence.[14]We simply do not know enough about the sociological conditions of the different periods to make anything like a definitive judgment. Perhaps, as mentioned above, Seow has argued the most cogently for the Persian period.[15] But even there the connections made between the sociological setting and the text of Ecclesiastes are not so specific as to demand such a setting. Even if one argued that the text demands a socioeconomic setting in which there is a wealthier ruling class and an oppressed lower class, and that there is also political corruption, one could place the book anywhere from the time of Solomon forward.Qohelet himself reminds us that the times do not really change all that much (1:9 – 11). I take the position here that no definitive socioeconomic setting for the book has been demonstrated.

6. TEXT

The Masoretic text (MT) of Ecclesiastes has come down to us in relatively good shape. Among the ancient versions of the book are texts in Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin. Much later (well into the Middles Ages) are Ethiopic and Arabic versions. From a text-critical perspective, the Greek text

(the Septuagint, or LXX) is the most important by far.

There is some controversy with regard to the LXX. It has a number of features, among them an extreme literalness, that distinguishes it from most other books in the LXX. It has been argued by many scholars, therefore, that the LXX of Ecclesiastes is actually the work of Aquila, a second-century AD Gentile convert to Judaism whose Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was recorded in the third column of Origen's famous Hexapla (a kind of parallel Bible). Others have denied that it was done by Aquila and claim, rather, that it is simply Aquila-like. In any case, because it is so literalistic, divergences between the LXX and the MT become rather important.The most significant of these will be noted in the exposition below.[16]

From Qumran there are two fragments of manuscripts of the text of Ecclesiastes, 4QQoha and 4QQohb, the first of which may date as early 175 BC. Together the fragments cover Ecclesiastes 1:10 – 14; 5:14 – 18;6:1, 3 – 8, 12; 7:1 – 10, 19 – 20. Most of the variants are orthographic (spelling). Any significant variations will be discussed in the exposition.[17]

It should also be mentioned here that at one point in the book there is a different verse enumeration, over a twenty-verse stretch, between the Hebrew and English versions. The first verse of ch. 5 in the English versions is the last verse of ch. 4 in the Hebrew text. Hence the Hebrew 4:17 – 5:19 = English 5:1 – 20. Beginning with ch. 6 the MT and the English versions are back in sync. Readers consulting commentaries that deal with the Hebrew text should note that many of them work with the Hebrew verse enumeration rather than the English one.

7. CANONICITY

Because of the book's apparently unorthodox positions and internal contradictions, its canonicity was a topic of debate in the ancient rabbinical literature, especially between the rabbinical schools of Hillel (in favor of inclusion) and Shammai (against inclusion). An account of these debates is beyond the space limitations of this commentary.

What is interesting to note, however, is that despite these extensive discussions, the book was accepted as canonical, though we are not sure why. The two most popular suggestions are that the last two verses of the book, with their more orthodox sentiments, and the connection to Solomon are what decided the issue. Interestingly, however, the much more conservative book Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach) did not make it into the Jewish canon despite its explicit drawing of the connection between wisdom and Torah piety, and books such as the Wisdom of Solomon, with explicit attribution to Solomon, did not make it into the canon either. We are not really sure why the rabbis finally accepted Ecclesiastes as canonical.

There was apparently no problem in the ancient church with respect to the canonicity of the book. Nor again are we sure why this was the case. Was it because of the Solomonic attribution? If so, then perhaps Ecclesiastes may have been correctly recognized as canonical, though for the wrong reason, as in the case of the NT book of Hebrews, which probably was received as canonical because of a belief in its Pauline authorship. And perhaps the reasons are really not that important. The church does not constitute canon; rather, it recognizes a canon that it receives from God, who is himself Canon.[18]

8. COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Israel did not exist in a vacuum. Her neighbors were involved in the writing of Wisdom literature long before Israel was a nation. Indeed it was probably only in the days of Solomon that Israel began to join the wisdom enterprise per se, and to contribute to, and even draw upon, the larger body of Wisdom literature in the ancient Near East.[19]What follows is a nonexhaustive list of some of the wisdom texts that preceded Ecclesiastes and that fall to a greater or lesser extent into the basic category of pessimistic or doubting wisdom.

From Egypt

Dispute Between a Man and His Ba [Soul][20]

Harper Song[21]

Complaints of Khakheperre-Sonb[22]

From Mesopotamia

Babylonian Theodicy[23] Dialogue of Pessimism[24]

I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom[25]

Counsels of a Pessimist[26]

In addition to these texts, all of which display some attitude on a continuum from skepticism to pessimism to something approaching cynicism, there are other wisdom texts that cannot be categorized as pessimistic as such, but nevertheless may contain occasional expressions of attitudes, statements, and instructions that have some close parallels in Ecclesiastes. For both these texts and the texts listed above, where significant parallels exist they will be noted in the course of the exposition.

Though it does not come under the category of Wisdom literature, another text in which there are significant parallels to Ecclesiastes is the Epic of Gilgamesh.[27] Again, these correspondences will be noted in the exposition. Other texts with which Ecclesiastes has a more formal correspondence will be discussed in the next section.

9. GENRE

Genres can be identified at various levels of abstraction. Furthermore, a biblical work that can be categorized as belonging to one genre can, of course, be made up of passages that belong to numerous other genres. In what follows we will first of all discuss briefly some of the various genres contained within Ecclesiastes and then go on to consider the genre of the book as a whole.

On a broad scale, the book is comprised of a combination of prose and poetry. While biblical Hebrew poetry is notoriously difficult to define, it may at least be said that its most recognizable characteristic is parallelism, a device by which two lines (more rarely, three or four) have a particular semantic and/ or grammatical or syntactical relationship to each other. Semantically, the two lines of the couplet may take the form of statement – restatement; statement – contrasting statement; cause – effect; effect – cause; if clause – then clause; and so on. Grammatically and syntactically, the lines may be parallel in terms of the parts of speech that are used and the actual order of the words.

More narrowly, among the most prominent genres in the book are: proverbs (short, pithy sayings; e.g., 4:6), instructions (which usually contain commands or prohibitions, with accompanying reasons; e.g., 5:1 – 7), and example stories (short vignettes to demonstrate the author's point; e.g., 9:14 – 16). Perhaps the genre that characterizes Ecclesiastes more than any other is the reflection. As defined by Roland Murphy, the reflection "states a thesis or goal which the writer considers and evaluates in a very personal way" (e.g., 2:1 – 17).[28]

Several proposals have been offered for the genre of the book as a whole, depending on how many points of similarity and what kinds of similarity one looks for to compare it to other works of literature in the same class. Other scholars deny that the book can be classified under a single genre designation. These various proposals, including the denial, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On a broad plane, the book can of course be categorized as Wisdom literature. More narrowly, other suggestions have been "reflection," "proverb," "diatribe," and "royal testament."

In this commentary I have adopted the position advocated by Tremper Longman that the work is best characterized as "framed wisdom autobiography," with the material inside the constructed frame of the prologue and epilogue finding its closest formal parallels in the genre of royal Akkadian "fictional autobiography." Longman, building on the work done for his published Yale dissertation, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*, compares Ecclesiastes to fifteen Akkadian texts in which a king introduces himself in the first person and then goes on to talk about his exploits.[29]All of these texts were written long after the death of the kings to whom they were attributed, thus making them fictional, pseudonymous works.

For three of these texts — the Cuthaean Legend of Naram-Sin, the Sin of Sargon text, and the Adad-guppi autobiography — there is a concluding section in which the king gives a series of wisdom admonitions and instructions. The book of Ecclesiastes is most closely parallel to these three texts. Like the kings in these texts, the king Qohelet introduces himself in the first person (1:12), goes on to tell of his exploits (his search, 1:12 – 6:9), and then proceeds to deliver wisdom sayings and instruction based on the earlier related narrative (6:10 – 12:7). Unlike the texts with which Ecclesiastes was compared, these Akkadian texts do not compare materially, inasmuch as they are not pessimistic works

(though some of the instructional material in the third section of these works comes out of mistakes the kings made during their exploits). Nevertheless, they do seem to provide the best formal comparisons.[30]

10. STRUCTURE

Franz Delitzsch, in his nineteenth-century commentary on Ecclesiastes, declared that all attempts to uncover a comprehensive structure for the book "have hitherto failed, and must fail."[31]If this prediction holds up, it will not be for lack of scholarly effort, for many proposals to account for the structure of the book have been made. Suggestions include: tracing patterns of consideration, assessment, and reasoning;[32]noticing alternating observation and instruction complexes;[33]finding polar oppositions;[34]and reading the book as a dialogical debate.[35]

There have also been attempts to ascertain the structure by taking into account the various repeated phrases in the book, such as "meaningless," "under the sun," "chasing after the wind," "I saw," and the like.Though such an approach certainly has merit, it must also reckon with the possibility that an author has been inconsistent with the use of the phrases, sometimes inserting them without any structural intentions;this seems to be the case in Ecclesiastes.

Addison Wright has coupled this last approach with what he perceives to be a numerical pattern in the book.[36]Based on the numerical value of the word *hebel* ("meaningless"; GK 2039), using the Hebrew letters to represent numbers, and the word's various formulations and distribution throughout the book, he arrives at a structure that seems to correspond with more broad, thematic divisions that had already been suggested by others. There is certainly merit to his initial observations in this regard, as noted particularly by Roland Murphy.[37]But Wright's subsequent attempts to provide a very intricate structure based on these numerical patterns has not won much support.[38]

This commentary, with its adoption of Longman's suggested genre designation for Ecclesiastes as "framed wisdom autobiography" (see above

under Genre), also takes the position that the broader structure for the book accords with that designation. The outline below is taken (with slight changes) from Longman:[39]

I. Prologue (1:1 – 11)
II. Qohelet's Autobiography (1:12 – 12:7)
A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)
B. Narrative of Qohelet's Quest for Meaning (1:13 – 6:9)
C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10 – 12:7)
III. Epilogue (12:8 – 14)

At the end of this introduction under Outline, this structure will be further f leshed out to provide a guide for the Text and Exposition to follow. But no claim is made here that this fuller outline provides the originally intended structure for the book. Delitzsch's prediction, I believe, has so far proved correct.

11. MESSAGE AND PURPOSE

As mentioned above under Authorship, I take the position that there are two voices in the book — that of Qohelet, who is the speaker in 1:12 – 12:7, and that of the frame-narrator, who is actually the author of the entire book, in 1:1 – 11 and 12:8 – 14 (briefly interrupting as well at 7:27). Qohelet, a literary creation of the frame-narrator, serves as a foil to provide a contrast for the author's message.That message is: Beware the dangers of pessimistic skeptical wisdom thought; rather, fear God and keep his commands, "for this is all there is to man" (a more literal rendering of 12:13). In other words, this is where the meaning of life resides.

Disputing that this or some other similar reading constitutes the message and purpose of the book are those who prefer to interpret Qohelet rather as a "preacher of joy."[40]They see the message of Ecclesiastes as an encouragement to live to the fullest, to enjoy life, to seize the day (*carpe diem*). Appeal is made to the so-called *carpe diem* passages (2:24 – 26; 3:12 – 14; 3:22; 5:18 – 20; 8:15; 9:7 – 10; and perhaps 11:7 – 10) as representing the book's true message and the sum of Qohelet's advice.

While Qohelet certainly does advocate the idea of the enjoyment of life in these passages, at least three factors (among more) provide strong arguments against this construal of Qohelet's purpose. First, the book's "motto" must be reckoned with. The word rendered by the NIV as "meaningless" is the Hebrew word *hebel*. In its literal sense it denotes "air, vapor, breath." But as it is used in Ecclesiastes, a better rendering of the metaphor is that suggested by Michael Fox, that of "absurd."[41]This captures the essence of Qohelet's use of the word. Thus a better translation for Ecclesiastes 1:2 would be:

"Absurdity of absurdities!"says Qohelet.

"Absurdity of absurdities"

Everything is absurd."

The point is not simply that life is meaningless or that it is a zero; rather, the point is that life is anti-meaning — it is a minus. This can be demonstrated, for example, from 1:18:

> For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
> the more knowledge, the more grief.

The point is not simply that wisdom and knowledge fail to provide returns on the time invested to acquire them, but that they provide exactly the opposite. The so-called *carpe diem* passages must be read in this light. Qohelet's best advice is to eat, drink, find satisfaction in your work, and enjoy life with your wife.But even these activities take place "under the sun" and come under the category of "absurd." In the end they are meaningless — or worse.

Second, it is important to note that the attitude with which Qohelet introduces these *carpe diem* passages is hardly cause for elation. Qohelet's recommendations to eat and drink and enjoy life are, for the most part, prefaced by the phrase, "there is nothing better than," or in other words, "this is the best I can come up with." Qohelet is not enthusiastic about these activities — he is merely resigned to them.

Third, as Longman so astutely comments, "Qohelet never lifts himself out of

his pessimism."[42]By the time you get to the end of the book, Qohelet is just as steeped in despair as he was at the beginning. The frame-narrator felt comfortable in bracketing the entire speech of Qohelet with the summary of his message, "Everything is absurd!" (1:2; 12:8).

As also noted under Authorship, I believe that in addition to being a warning against the danger of skeptical, pessimistic wisdom, the book is also in measure a censure of the Davidic dynasty for its excursion into the larger body of ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature. It was the king's responsibility to teach Torah, the commandments of God, to the qāhāl (the "assembly"), the people (see Dt 17:18 – 20; 31:9 – 13;2Ki 23:1 – 3; 2Ch 34:29 – 32).While both Solomon and Hezekiah may have done this, their teaching was, nevertheless, from the epilogist's perspective, unfortunately mixed with the more speculative, pessimistic wisdom thought of the ancient Near East. In contrast to the teaching of Qohelet, the epilogist's simple instruction is that one should fear God and keep his commands (Ecc 12:13 – 14). In some measure, he censures Qohelet for seeking wisdom and teaching the people knowledge from a source other than Torah.While Qohelet's theology is not necessarily unorthodox (though in measure it certainly is), his mixture of orthodox theology with speculative, pessimistic wisdom is, for the epilogist, at best unnecessary and at worst destructive.

That being said, a qualification must also be made. This fictional character the author has created in large part reflects the author's own thoughts. Both Qohelet and the author belong squarely in Israel's wisdom tradition. In 12:9 – 11 the author characterizes Qohelet as a sage, one who sought to teach the people upright and true words.While the author is ultimately critical of Qohelet and feels the need to add at the end what Qohelet never quite seemed to get around to saying, he is also respectful toward him.

If Qohelet and others like him are constantly burdened with concerns over the meaning of life, it is in fact a God-given burden (1:12; 3:10 – 11).There may be those who can go through their lives being happy-go-lucky, as it were, seldom giving any thought to the meaning of life, its apparent randomness, and its unfairness. Qohelet is not one of them. And while it may be wrong to teach doubt and skeptical thought, it is not wrong to have or give voice to those doubts.[43]On this point, Addison Wright notes:

> The presence of the book in the canon validates in every age the same kind of critical assessment of theology, conventional wisdom, and piety as Qoheleth practiced, and validates it not as an optional activity but as one constantly necessary to keep religion honest and in touch with reality.. . .
>
> Finally, in no way can Qoheleth be said to have had a close personal relationship with God. Not infrequently the rhetoric of the believing community creates the impression that all the faithful should be experiencing such a relationship and that they are in some way at fault if they do not. Clearly, countless thousands of devout people travel in the dark as did Qoheleth, and they can find dignity in the believing community because Qoheleth was deemed worthy to have a place in the biblical writings.[44]

Wright may have overstated the case. Clearly, the "rhetoric" of the believing community certainly does suggest that the faithful should have a close relationship with God, that they should know Jesus Christ and be indwelt by his Spirit; and this rhetoric was passed down to it by the NT authors themselves. Nevertheless, there are many among us whose "dark night of the soul" is darker and lasts longer than it does for others. And perhaps for them Qohelet may be in many ways a comforting word.

Ellen Davis makes reference to a Vietnam War chaplain who said that Ecclesiastes "was the only part of the Bible that his soldiers were willing to hear."[45]She goes on to note that one of her students, "who suffers from recurrent bouts of depression, says that reading Ecclesiastes is 'like slipping into a warm bath.' " This therapeutic function of the book certainly deserves to be recognized. But while the book can indeed, in cases like these, provide a certain solace ("misery loves company"), the ultimate solace, I would argue, must come from another source, from Christ himself, who knows firsthand about the absurdity of life (see next section).

12. BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL CONNECTIONS

Attention here will be given briefly to four ways in which Ecclesiastes ties into the larger canon of Scripture (though there are many more). First, there are some obvious connections with the book of Genesis (especially Ge 1 – 4). Several

studies have called attention to these connections.[46]The preoccupation with the arduousness of toil and its lack of return connects with the curse on the man in the Garden of Eden after the fall (Ge 3:17 – 19). That human beings die and return to dust and that their spirit returns back to the Creator (Ecc 12:7) reflect Genesis 2:7 and 3:19.

I also believe that the choice of Qoheleth's theme word, *hebel* ("meaningless" or "absurd"; GK 2039), is meant to call to mind the narrative in Genesis 4 about the death of Abel (Abel's name and the term *hebel* are identical). In a book that bemoans life's arbitrariness and injustice, the use of *hebel* is intended to remind the reader of Abel, the only one of the four human characters mentioned so far in the book of Genesis of whom there is no recorded wrongdoing, and yet the first one to die.

Second, Martin Shields and Nicholas Perrin have called attention to the fact that the phrase "one shepherd" in 12:11 occurs only two other places in the OT, both of them in Ezekiel (Eze 34:32 and 37:24), in reference to the promised Davidic Messiah.[47] Perrin, in particular, suggests that its use in Ecclesiastes 12:11 is a direct reference to this king. I believe, rather, that the phrase as used in 12:11 refers more immediately to the king-sage Qohelet, who represents the Davidic dynasty, but that at the same time it holds out hope for a future king-sage whose teaching will be pure wisdom from God, unmixed with worldly wisdom. Ultimately, that King-Sage is Jesus, who has become for us the very "wisdom of God"(1Co 1:24, 30).[48]

Furthermore, the wisdom dispensed to us by this Sage far outstrips and stands in direct contradiction to the wisdom of Qohelet. Qohelet failed in his search for the meaning of life. Jesus tells us why, in that such searches are doomed to failure from the very start: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 10:39). Meaning in life is not found by searching for it, but by abandoning the search and losing one's self in Christ.

Third, in Romans 8:20 the apostle Paul says that the world has been subjected to "frustration," using the Greek word *mataiotes*m, the same word the LXX used to translate the Hebrew word *hebel* ("meaningless").In other words, Paul freely admits that Qohelet was correct.We do live in a frustrated, meaningless, absurd world. But then Paul goes on to declare in 8:32 that God "did not spare his own

Son, but gave him up for us all." This is an absurd world, but God has subjected his own Son to that very absurdity.

Indeed, this was the ultimate absurdity: the tortuous death of the only righteous man who ever lived, he "who had no sin" (2Co 5:21), that we might be rescued from the absurdity of this world and be "brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Ro 8:21). In this way the NT provides a hope for redemption and resurrection that answers Qohelet's quest for meaning in a way he never considered.[49]

Fourth, Qohelet's complaint that there is no reward or gain for his labor (ʿāmāl; cf. 1:3) finds an echo in the Servant Songs in the book of Isaiah. In the second of the four Servant Songs, in Isaiah 49:4, the servant complains, "I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing [*hebel*]." Yet, the servant, unlike Qohelet, lifts himself up out of his despair and declares, "Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand, and my reward is with my God." Then, in the fourth Servant Song, in Isaiah 53:11, the Lord declares about his servant that "after the suffering (ʿāmāl) of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied. It is in the (ʿāmāl) of the Suffering Servant, whom Christians have traditionally identified as the very Son of God, that Qohelet's question finds an answer. And for those who identify themselves with the crucified and risen Jesus, they too can be assured that their "labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1Co 15:58).

13. PREACHING AND TEACHING THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

If, as argued above, Qohelet serves as a foil for the frame-narrator to get across his message of the danger of pessimistic, skeptical wisdom, what are the implications for the preaching and teaching of the book? Does it mean that sermons should not be preached, for example, from 3:1 – 15; 4:1 – 9; 5:1 – 7; or 12:1 – 7? Does it mean that it is wrong to preach a series of sermons from Ecclesiastes, since the only real word from God comes in the last few verses? Doesn't this perspective on the book in essence destroy the possibility of preaching anything other than one message from the book?

In large measure, the answer to those last three questions is “yes.” But a similar situation presents itself to today’s preacher in the book of Job. For the most part, preachers are comfortable preaching from the opening story in Job 1 – 2, from the closing story in ch. 42, from Job’s speeches scattered through the book, and from God’s speeches, which come near the end (chs. 38 – 41). I have never heard a sermon preached from the speeches of Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar, however — and rightly so. For their speeches are, in essence, a foil for the rest of the teaching in the book.These speeches are not the word of God per se, and yet they are contained in a book that is the Word of God in order to provide a contrast to the book’s ultimate message. To some extent, even Job’s speeches become a foil that God plays off in his speeches at the end.

In the same way, the long autobiographical speech of Qohelet in Ecclesiastes is not the word of God but is contained in a book that is God’s Word. And sermons preached from these passages in Ecclesiastes should, as with all sermons, be biblical-theological; that is, they should be concerned with the larger message not only of the book of Ecclesiastes but also of the canon as a whole. Any single passage should be preached in an ever-expanding circle of contexts, beginning with the immediate context and extending to the entirety of Scripture.

Sermons along this line can draw on the full richness of God’s Word by noting, for example, places where a text in Ecclesiastes has thematic or motific links to one of the four suggested biblical-theological lines mentioned above: (1) the book of Genesis and the issues there of labor, the curse, life, death, dust, breath, Abel (*hebel*), and so on; (2) the hope for a wise king, ultimately to be fulfilled in Christ, who will speak a better word than Qohelet’s *hebel* and who dispenses a wisdom that helps us deal with life’s absurdity; (3) the hope of redemption and resurrection, secured for us by Christ’s incarnation and his decision to subject himself to the ultimate absurdity; and (4) the satisfaction that Christ received from his labor and the assurance that neither will our labor be in vain. This always makes for a sermon that is more biblically informed, more theologically correct, and ultimately more beneficial for the hearers. But it is also hard work.

Nevertheless, perhaps the answer to the above questions can also be “no.” Interestingly, in 1 Corinthi-ans 3:19 Paul quotes from Job 5:13 (“he catches the wise in their craftiness”) and introduces his quotation with the formula, “as it is written.” Yet the person he is quoting is Eliphaz, of whom God said that he and

his two friends “have not spoken of me what is right” (Job 42:8). Was Eliphaz correct in what he said in Job 5:13? Yes, he was. Yet the speech as a whole was headed in the wrong direction and was ultimately a correct assessment neither of Job’s situation nor of the character of God.

Likewise, Qohelet says many good things, many correct things, and in fact, like Eliphaz, seems to have considered himself a guardian of God’s honor (5:1 – 7). But ultimately, on the whole, he leads us in the wrong direction. So, can individual passages from Ecclesiastes be preached without always being qualified by the epilogue and the larger canon of Scripture? Perhaps, but I believe the warrant for such preaching is fairly thin. Qohelet was certainly correct about the twistedness and absurdity of this world, and he does occasionally give some good advice, but on the whole his words are best preached in the light of the rest of the canon, and particularly in the light of the NT authors, who found in his successor a King-Sage whose wisdom is, indeed, the very wisdom of God.

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15. OUTLINE

I. Prologue:The Absurd Circle (1:1 – 11)
II. Qohelet’s Autobiography: The Wisdom Quest (1:12 – 12:7)
A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)
B. Narrative of Qohelet’s Quest for Meaning (1:13 – 6:9)
1. Qohelet Introduces His Quest (1:13 – 18)
2. The Royal Pleasures (2:1 – 11)
3. Wisdom and Folly (2:12 – 16)
4. Hatred of Life (2:17 – 26)
5. A Pretty Poem about Time (3:1 – 8)

6. But Time Is Elusive (3:9 – 15)
7. God's Test (3:16 – 22)
8. Oppression, or "In Praise of the Dead and the Unborn" (4:1 – 3)
9. Laziness versus Over-industriousness (4:4 – 6)
10. Aloneness versus Companionship (4:7 – 12)
11. Wisdom, Folly, and Succession (4:13 – 16)
12. Fools in God's Presence (5:1 – 7 [4:17 – 5:6])
13. Oppression and Politics, Poverty and Wealth (5:8 – 20 [5:7 – 19])
14. Labor without Satisfaction (6:1 – 9)
C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10 – 12:7)
1. Impotence and Ignorance (6:10 – 12)
2. When Things Are All Twisted (7:1 – 14)
3. A Balanced, Mediocre Life (7:15 – 22)
4. Of Schemes and Schemers: The Knowledge of Good and Evil (7:23 – 29)
5. Fools in the King's Presence (8:1 – 9)
6. The Inversion of Justice and Injustice (8:10 – 17)
7. The Hand of Fate and the Serendipity of the Hand (9:1 – 10)
8. Time and Chance (9:11 – 12)
9. A Forgotten Sage (9:13 – 18)
10. Folly Gets More Press Than Wisdom (10:1 – 3)
11. Some Loosely Connected Words about Rulers (10:4 – 7)
12. Some Occupational Hazards and Difficulties (10:8 – 11)
13. Some Words about Words (10:12 – 15)
14. Some Loosely Connected Words about Royalty (10:16 – 20)
15. Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control? (11:1 – 6)
16. Some Questionable Advice for Youth (11:7 – 10)
17. An Apocalyptic Death (12:1 – 7)
III. Epilogue: Qohelet Was Wise — But (12:8 – 14)

1. David Alan Hubbard, *Beyond Futility: Messages of Hope from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: 3Eerdmans, 1976), 7.

2. Michael V. Fox," Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet," *HUCA* 48 (1977): 91.

3. In his most recent commentary, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1999), Fox has changed his view somewhat and now sees Ecclesiastes 12:13 – 14 as being the

work of an additional and more orthodox epilogist.

4. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2 – 9.

5. Ibid., 38.

6. Jerry E. Shepherd, “The Identity of Qohelet.” Paper read at the Pacific Northwest Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Portland, Oregon, May 1998.

7. Some of these parallels will be called to the reader’s attention during the course of the commentary.

8. Daniel C. Fredericks, *Qoheleth’s Language: Re-evaluating Its Nature and Date* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1988); Bo Isaksson, *Studies in the Language of Qoheleth with Special Emphasis on the Verbal System* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis; Studia Semitica Upsaliensa 10; Uppsala/Stockholm: Uppsala University/Almqvist & Wiksell, 1987); Anton Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth* (OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992).

9. Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18C; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 20.

10. Robert Gordis, *Koheleth —The Man and His World: A Study of Ecclesiastes*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1968), 75 – 77; James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 50; Frank Crüsemann, “The Unchangeable World: The ‘Crisis of Wisdom’ in Koheleth,” in *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984), 57 – 77.

11. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21 – 35.

12. Addison G. Wright, “Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth),” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* , ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A.Fitzmeyer, and Roland

E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 489; so also Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 49, though he still argues on other grounds for a Hellenistic setting.

13. Shepherd,"The Identity of Qohelet."

14. Roland E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC 23A; Dallas: Word, 1992), xxi.

15. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 21 – 36.

16. For more on this controversy see Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, 7 – 8; John Jarick, "Aquila's Koheleth," *Text* 15 (1990): 131 – 39.

17. Readers who wish to look at an accessible English translation and discussion of these fragments may find in it Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 619 – 21.

18. On this point see the excellent essay by Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The New Testament as Canon," in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition,A Challenge, A Debate*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 165 – 83. For more concerning the debate on the canonicity of Ecclesiastes, see Longman, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 26 – 29; Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 297 – 304, 319 – 21; Michael J. Broyde, "Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs," *Judaism* 44 (1995): 65 – 79.

19. On this point, which is not undisputed, see Walter A. Brueggemann, "The Social Significance of Solomon as a Patron of Wisdom," pages 117 – 32 in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

20. See *AEL*, 1:163 – 69; *ANET*, 405 – 7.

21. See *AEL*, 1:196 – 97; *ANET*, 467.

22. See *AEL*, 1:145 – 49.

23. See *BWL*, 63 – 91; *ANET*, 438 – 40.

24. See *BWL*, 139 – 49; *ANET*, 437 – 38.

25. See *BWL*, 21 – 62; *ANET*, 434 – 37.

26. See *BWL*, 107 – 9.

27. See *ANET*, 72 – 99, as well as in Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh:The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (London: Penguin, 1999); see also Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (2nd ed.; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963); Bruce William Jones, "From Gilgamesh to Qoheleth," pages 349 – 79 in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature*, ed. William W. Hallo et al. (Scripture in Context 3; Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990); Karel vander Toorn, "Did Ecclesiastes Copy Gilgamesh?" *BRev* 16, no. 1 (2000): 22 – 30, 50.

28. Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (FOTL 13; Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1981), 181. For a fuller discussion of these and other genres contained in Ecclesiastes, see ibid., 125 – 49.

29. Tremper Longman III, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography: A Generic and Comparative Study* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1991).

30. For much fuller discussions, see Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 15 – 20; idem, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography*; idem, "Comparative Methods in Old Testament Studies: Ecclesiastes Reconsidered," *Tyndale Students Fellowship Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (March – April 1984): 5 – 9.

31. Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes* (K&D; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 [no original date]), 188.

32. Pauline A.Viviano, “The Book of Ecclesiastes: A Literary Approach,” *TBT* 22, no. 2 (1984): 79 – 84.

33. Stephan De Jong, “A Book on Labour: The Structuring Principles and the Main Theme of the Book of Qohelet,” *JSOT* 54 (1992): 107 – 16.

34. James A. Loader, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (BZAW; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1979).

35. T.A. Perry, *Dialogues with Kohelet:The Book of Ecclesiastes: Translation and Commentary* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1993).

36. Addison D. G. Wright, “The Riddle of the Sphinx:The Structure of the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 30 (1968): 313 – 34;idem,“The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 42 (1980): 35 – 51.

37. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature*, 127 – 29; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxviii – xli.

38. Addison D. G. Wright, “Additional Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth,” *CBQ* 45 (1983): 32 – 43.

39. Longman, *Book of Ecclesiastes*, 20.

40. See, e.g., Roger N. Whybray, “Qoheleth, Preacher of Joy,” *JSOT* 23 (1982): 87 – 98.

41. See Michael V. Fox,“The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 409 – 27; see also his most recent commentary, *A Time to Tear Down*.

42. Longman,“Comparative Methods,” 8.

43. On this point, see Robert Davidson, *The Courage to Doubt: Exploring an Old Testament Theme* (London: SCM, 1983); see also his *Wisdom and Worship* (London: SCM, 1990).

44. Wright,“Ecclesiastes,” 490 – 91.

45. Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 159.

46. See William H. U. Anderson,“The Curse of Work in Qoheleth: An Exposea of Genesis 3:17 – 19 in Ecclesiastes,” *EvQ* 70 (1998): 99 – 113; David M. Clemens, “The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1 – 3,” *Them* 19, no. 3 (1994):5 – 8; Charles C. Forman, “Koheleth’s Use of Genesis,” *JSS* 5 (1960): 256 – 63.

47. Martin A. Shields, “Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom,” *TynBul* 50 (1999): 132 – 33; Nicholas Perrin, “Messianism in the Narrative Frame of Ecclesiastes?” *RB* 108 (2001): 51 – 57.

48. For an excellent study on Jesus as fulfillment of wisdom, see Ben Witherington III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

49. For an intriguing discussion of other New Testament connections, see William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes* (Interpretation;Louisville:Westminster John Knox, 2000), 121 – 37.

Text and Exposition

I. PROLOGUE: THE ABSURD CIRCLE (1:1 – 11)

1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem:

2 “Meaningless! Meaningless!”
  says the Teacher.
  “Utterly meaningless!
  Everything is meaningless.”

3 What does man gain from all his labor
  at which he toils under the sun?

4 Generations come and generations go,
  but the earth remains forever.

5 The sun rises and the sun sets,
  and hurries back to where it rises.

6 The wind blows to the south
  and turns to the north;
  round and round it goes,
  ever returning on its course.

7 All streams fl ow into the sea,
  yet the sea is never full.
  To the place the streams come from,
  there they return again.

8 All things are wearisome,
  more than one can say.
  The eye never has enough of seeing,
  nor the ear its fill of hearing.

9 What has been will be again,
  what has been done will be done again;
  there is nothing new under the sun.

10 Is there anything of which one can say,
  “Look! This is something new”?
  It was here already, long ago;
  it was here before our time.

11 There is no remembrance of men of old,
  and even those who are yet to come
  will not be remembered
  by those who follow.

COMMENTARY

1 The frame-narrator, the author of the prologue and epilogue, introduces the main speaker in the book, "the Teacher" (*qōhelet*, GK 7738; henceforward I will refer to this person with the more simplified transliteration, Qohelet). By calling him David's son and a king, the author wants the reader to think immediately of Solomon. But by not specifically naming him "Solomon," he leaves the identification ambiguous. The position taken here is that Qohelet is a persona created by the book's frame-narrator. He is painted with obvious Solomonic characteristics but, under closer consideration, can be seen to be a composite character representative of the entire Davidic dynasty (see more under Title and Authorship in the introduction).

The term Qohelet comes from the Hebrew root *qhl*, which means "to assemble." Thus Qohelet would be "the Assembler." Most likely, the author intends for the reader to view Qohelet as a person standing before an assembly to give some kind of instruction; hence the NIV's "Teacher" is probably a fair representation of that idea, though we should not picture a situation analogous to a modern-day classroom. Taking into account this person's royal status, perhaps we should envision a scene like that in 1 Kings 8, in which Solomon "assembled" (NIV, "summoned") the people of Israel to Jerusalem for the dedication of the temple and addressed the "assembly" (cf. also 2Ki 23:1 – 3, in which King Josiah assembled all the people to read to them the book of the covenant).

2 This verse serves as a motto-like summary of Qohelet's teaching. The NIV 's "meaningless"(NASB, "vanity") translates the Hebrew word *hebel* (GK 2039). Literally, the word denotes air, vapor, or breath; but here it is used metaphorically.The exact nuance of the metaphor is debated. Alternative translations include, in either nominal or adjectival forms, "futility," "transience," "impermanence,""ephemerality," and "incongruity."

While perhaps no one translation can cover all the intended nuances in the word's thirty-eight occurrences in the book, the position taken here is that Michael Fox's translation in his commentary (*Time to Tear Down*), "absurd," best captures Qohelet's meaning on the whole. While "incongruity" comes close, it doesn't adequately represent the oppressiveness of the situation as described

by Qohelet. He is not simply perplexed intellectually by what appears to be an unsolvable puzzle, but he is emotionally and psychologically anguished as well.

"Absurdity" is also an advance over the idea of "meaningless." It takes account of the idea often expressed in the book (see, e.g., 1:18) that not only is life a zero — it is oftentimes a minus. The fivefold repetition of *hebel* anticipates the emphasis on repetition and circularity in the verses to follow.(Both the NIV's "Meaningless! Meaningless!" and "Utterly meaningless!" is literally "meaninglessness of meaninglessnesses"; this is simply a Hebrew idiom expressing the superlative.)

3 The frame-narrator begins to unpack what Qohelet means by calling everything meaningless or absurd. His initial observation has to do with labor (*'āmāl*, GK 6662). Though this word does not always carry negative connotations in the OT, it quite often does, and does so consistently in Ecclesiastes. In the book, labor is an oppressive business, one for which there is not sufficient compensation. In Ecclesiastes the term refers not just to physical work but also to the arduousness of life as a whole. It can also refer to the results of one's labors."Profit" (*yitrôn*), though it is indeed a word borrowed from the economic terminology of the day, is not used in the technical sense of what is left over after all expenses; rather, it refers to compensation in general. Qohelet sees no return for one's labor, whether looking at the gross or the net.

This absurdity of work for no profit takes place "under the sun." As used in Ecclesiastes the phrase refers to whatever might be accessible by Qohelet's or humankind's senses — in other words, everything. While commentaries make much of the fact that certainly Qohelet is not concluding that everything in the entire universe is meaningless, and certainly neither God nor things in heaven, but only that which is technically "under the sun," the observation does not, in fact, exempt much. Everything on which Qohelet can possibly lay his eyes is meaningless.

4 – 7 Qohelet laments the passing of successive generations against the backdrop of the unchanging world stage. That the "earth remains forever"is not the point; it only provides a cruel contrast to the passing of the generations. As the generations come and go, the earth remains, unmoved and uncaring, and each generation might as well not have even existed. These lines anticipate the

conclusion in v.11 — not only does the inanimate earth forget those who have lived, but people don't remember them either.

Sun, wind, and rivers go through their meaningless cycles. The repetition of key words in this passage, with little recourse to the use of substitutionary pronouns, reinforces the concept of meaningless repetition. The language used with regard to the sun is particularly striking. The NIV's "hurries" translates שָׁאַף, which more literally means "to pant" or "to gasp." This may well reflect the ancient Near Eastern concept of the sun as making its circuit from horizon to horizon across the sky by day, and then traveling underneath the earth by night to get back to the first horizon in time to start the process all over again. The point here is that even the sun takes part in the absurd circle.

While Qohelet says that all things "under the sun" are meaningless, here he extends the concept to the sun itself.

Interestingly, by way of contrast, Psalm 19:4 – 6 describes the sun in its travel in more glorious terms: "like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course." The psalmist uses the sun's journey as one illustration of how the heavens "declare the glory of God" (19:1). Qohelet uses it as an illustration for his thesis that all is meaningless. Though Qohelet may on occasion play the poet, he never becomes a psalmist!

8 After taking time in vv.5 – 7 to use the natural elements to describe his thesis, he returns to the sphere of human activity. The word translated "things" (דְּבָרִים, GK 1821) is also the usual Hebrew term for "words." In which sense it is used here is difficult to decide. It is probably best to see דְּבָרִים as providing a transition that describes both the "things" (the activities) of the previous verses and the words to be mentioned in the following verses. In any case, they are "wearisome" or "wearying." This word derives from יָגַע, which, much like "labor" (עָמָל) in v.3, can refer to work in general or more pejoratively to its wearying effects.The latter seems preferable here. Indeed, words cannot be found to express this wearisomeness.

Alternatively, taking דְּבָרִים to mean "words," one can read the verse as expressing the tiresomeness of making and listening to so much verbiage. At the same time, despite the overdose of words, there is still no satisfaction for the

listening ear or the watching eye. Qohelet's own words will be no different.

9 – 11 The summary goes on to note the same repetitiveness in human activity that characterized the natural phenomena described earlier. Nothing new ever really happens. Despite the multiplicity of words and actions that take place under the sun, nothing new ever really occurs. So why are people deceived into thinking that there are indeed new happenings? For Qohelet the answer is "a colossal ignorance of the past, a failed memory"(Crenshaw, 68).

But this answer given by Qohelet in v.11 is more than simply an explanation as to humankind's self-deceit about newness. It constitutes the substance of the oppressive absurdity that hangs over Qohelet's head throughout the entire book.Philosophers today ask the question, "If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one to hear it, does it make a sound?" Qohelet asks a similar but much graver question: "If a man is born and lives and dies, and then after he dies, no one remembers him, did he ever really live?" Qohelet despairs because he knows that one day he too will join the thousands of nameless, faceless, forgotten people who once played parts on the earth's stage.

The message for the readers is clear: "Nor will you escape such a fate. Any funerals or memorials conducted in your honor will only be resumes its activity fullscale. The morning after you've gone, the stock exchange will open, the trains will run, and children will play in the streets. Did you suppose that it might have been otherwise? Fools, deceive yourselves no longer!"

NOTES

1 קֹהֶלֶת (*qōhelet*, GK 7738) is regarded by almost all commentators as derived from the root קָהַל (*qhl*), the verbal form of which means "to assemble"; the corresponding noun refers to an "assembly."Though some have thought that it might be a proper name, the occurrence of the word with the article "the" in 12:8 and possibly in 7:27 (see exposition) suggests that it should rather be seen as denoting an office.

2 There have been numerous articles, even dissertations, devoted to

understanding the meaning of הֶבֶל (*hebel*, GK 2039) in Ecclesiastes. In particular, see Fox, “The Meaning of *Hebel* for Qohelet,” *JBL* 105 (1986): 409 – 27; Douglas Miller, *Symbol and Rhetoric in Ecclesiastes: The Place of* Hebel *in Qohelet’s Work* (Academica Biblica; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002); J. E. McKenna, “The Concept of *Hebel* in the Book of Ecclesiastes,” *SJT* 45 (1992): 19 – 28. It should also be noted that some commentators suggest that the narrator here has gone too far in summarizing Qohelet’s views. But in 1:14, a verse definitely falling within the first-person narrative, Qohelet confirms the narrator’s summary:“I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

4 – 7 Some (as far back as Ibn Ezra, twelfth century AD) have suggested that the mention of earth, sun, wind, and rivers in these verses is a conscious mirroring of the four elements thought by ancient Greek philosophers to comprise the world (earth, fire, air, water). Against this suggestion, however, is the different role the earth plays in this passage in contrast to the other three.

10 Krüger, 25 – 26, has made the intriguing suggestion that Qohelet’s denial that there is anything “new”could be a critique of prophetic or apocalyptic pronouncements that God either has or is about to do something new.This would be especially directed at passages like Isaiah 42:9; 43:19; 48:16; and 65:17 – 25.If correct, this would be one more piece of evidence for Qohelet’s nonorthodoxy.

II. QOHELET’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE WISDOM QUEST (1:12 – 12:7)

A. Autobiographical Introduction (1:12)

12 I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

12 Qohelet now introduces himself to us in the first person. This introduction is similar to the introductory notice in the royal,"fictional Akkadian autobiographies," to which I believe Ecclesiastes has the greatest formal generic similarity (see Genre and Structure in the introduction). In addition to what we learned about Qohelet earlier in v.1, we now find out (though we should have already surmised as much) that he is king over Israel.

Commentators note here that other than Solomon, no Davidic king was ever said to have ruled over Israel. Elsewhere I have argued that particularly for the book of Chronicles, after the demise of the northern kingdom Hezekiah effectively becomes the king for the northern Israelite peoples and, by default as it were, but also by his actions, king over all Israel (Shepherd, "The Identity of Qohelet"). If this is the case, then perhaps we see here one more clue that Qohelet is a composite character representing the entire Davidic dynasty.

NOTE

12 הָיִיתִי (*hayîṯî*; NIV, "I . . . was") is a Qal perfect of הָיָה (*hāyâ*; "to be") and would normally be translated as past tense, as the NIV has it. But the NASB's "have been" is also certainly within the range of translational options for the perfect and may indeed be the best rendering here. Alternatively, it could simply be a literary subtlety whereby the author lets us know that Qohelet is representative of a king long dead or a dynasty with no currently reigning descendant.

B. Narrative of Qohelet's Quest for Meaning (1:13 – 6:9)

1. Qohelet Introduces His Quest (1:13 – 18)

OVERVIEW

These verses, as noted by Murphy (*Wisdom Literature*, 134), may be conveniently divided into two parallel sections best characterized as reflections:

First reflection (vv.13 – 15)
Statement about the meaninglessness of pursuing wisdom (vv.13 – 14)
Proverb quoted in support (v.15)
Second reflection (vv.16 – 18)
Statement about the meaninglessness of pursuing wisdom (vv.16 – 17)
Proverb quoted in support (v.18)

13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.What a heavy
burden God has laid on men! 14I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them
are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

15 What is twisted cannot be straightened;
what is lacking cannot be counted.

16 I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has
ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 17Then I
applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that
this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

COMMENTARY

13 – 15 Qohelet informs the reader that he gave himself over to the task of exploring by wisdom all that happens "under heaven" (simply a variant of "under the sun").Then follows what may be taken either as a description of what he has learned about all that happens, or as a judgment about the burdensome character of his exploration; the latter is more likely. He characterizes it as a "heavy burden."The NASB's "grievous task" is more on the road toward a correctly nuanced translation of the adjective רַע (רָע; "evil"; GK 8273).While the word does not carry moral overtones in all of its occurrences, its use here does demonstrate how oppressive Qohelet regards this task (*'inyān*).

Untranslated in the NIV is the verb rendered by the NASB as "to be afflicted with" (*'ānâ*).'"Afflicted"may be too strong; perhaps it would be better rendered "kept occupied with." In any case, what is especially important to note is that the one who has consigned people to this task is God. As Crenshaw, 73, remarks (and understatedly so), "Qohelet's view of the deity lacks the warmth of the trusting relationship in some parts of the Hebrew Bible."

In v.14, Qohelet confirms the narrator's summary of his thought in v.2 and adds that activities done under the sun are a "chasing after the wind,"a futile activity that, according to 1:6, will keep one going around in circles. In proverbial fashion, Qohelet confirms his thesis by noting that one cannot straighten what has been twisted and cannot count items that are missing. Later (7:13) Qohelet will point out that God is the one who has done the twisting.

16 – 18 Again Qohelet resolves to go exploring and this time adds a little boast that his wisdom was greater than any who ruled Jerusalem before him.This seems strange in that David was the only Israelite king before Solomon who reigned in Jerusalem. That this time Qohelet leaves out his having ruled "over Israel" (as mentioned in v.13) has caused some commentators to speculate that he may be referring as well to the Jebusite kings, who ruled the city before David's conquest and establishment of Jerusalem as his capitol. This seems unlikely.More likely is the possibility that here the author is giving a clue that leads away from a strict Solo-monic identification, while intending that instead the reader see Qohelet as a composite portrait of the Davidic dynasty as a whole.

It may seem strange in v.17 that, in addition to wisdom, Qohelet also resolves to understand "madness and folly." While in the rest of the book Qohelet will by no means actually advocate that one pursue a course of folly, he will constantly bemoan the fact that the same fate is reserved for both the wise person and the fool. But did this observation, at least for a brief moment, lead Qohelet to investigate whether there were any advantages to being a fool?

One is reminded of that delusional (foolish?) character Elwood P. Dowd in Mary Chase's play *Harvey* , in which Elwood at one point reflects on what his mother told him: "She'd say to me, 'In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so clever or oh so pleasant.' Well for years I was clever. I recommend pleasant." Perhaps it was worth a try to look at folly, since wisdom hadn't achieved the desired results. In fact, as Qohelet says in v.18, not only had his wisdom and knowledge failed to bring satisfaction and gain; it actually brought exactly the opposite. The increase of wisdom and knowledge only correlatively increased his sorrow and grief. This was, indeed, an absurdity.

NOTES

13 It is possible that עִנְיָן (ʿinyān, “task”; GK 6721; NIV, “burden”) may be related semantically to the verb עָנָה (ʿānâ). But even if this is not the case, there does at least seem to be a sound play involved, thus justifying a translation along the lines of, “an evil *task* with which to be *tasked*.”

14 Several meanings have been suggested for רְעוּת (rᵉʿût, “chasing”) after the wind, among them “desiring” and “shepherding.” “Chasing” seems preferable.

2. The Royal Pleasures (2:1 – 11)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet now describes his “experiment” to find meaning and satisfaction in various pleasures that are, for the most part, royal prerogatives unavailable to the majority of people.

1 I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that
also proved to be meaningless. 2 “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure
accomplish?” 3 I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly — my mind still guiding
me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few
days of their lives.
4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. 5 I made gardens and
parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. 6 I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing
trees. 7 I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also
owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. 8 I amassed silver and gold for
myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem
as well — the delights of the heart of man. 9 I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem
before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.
10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.
11 Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 Qohelet proposes a pleasure test to find out what is good, but he declares the result to be *hebel* (“meaningless”) after discovering that laughter is foolish and pleasure accomplishes nothing. He adds wine as a variable to his experiment and even flirts again, as he had in 1:17, with the possibility of adopting folly — such is his desperation — to discern what might provide consolation for his all-too-painful awareness of the brevity of life. Nevertheless, his mind (לֵב, “heart,” as in v.1), guiding him with wisdom, prevents him from adopting that course.

4 – 9 More specifically, now, Qohelet details the various items in which he has sought to find meaning in order to try to find something he can declare not to be *hebel* (“meaningless”). The list includes building projects, plants, animals, money, and people, all of which he either built or acquired, as he says, “for myself ” (לִי). This phrase occurs, adnauseum, nine times in vv.4 – 9, of which for stylistic reasons the NIV translates only a few. This immediately eliminates the possibility of any altruistic motives — “for the good of my people” — being attributed to the king here. The list is also intended to remind the reader of Solomon, whose building projects, monetary possessions, and multiplication of wives are narrated in 1 Kings 1 – 11 and 1 Chronicles 1 – 9. It should also be noted, however, that other Davidic kings also multiplied and boasted of their great possessions, such as Hezekiah (2Ki 20:12 – 15).

Attention must be called here to Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20, a passage that, one can argue, forms for the frame-narrator a conscious backdrop for the crafting of his Qohelet character. The passage specifically forbids the king to amass silver and gold, marry many wives, or “consider himself better than his brothers.” There is also an implicit condemnation of the desire on the part of the Israelites to have a king “like all the nations around us.” Qohelet, in Ecclesiastes 2:4 – 9, *does* amass silver and gold, *does* acquire many women, *does* exalt himself over his brothers (his indulgences having been by no means the common lot of the grand majority of the people in his kingdom), and *does* end up being a king like those of the other nations.

Qohelet himself refers in 2:8 to his acquisition of the “treasure of kings,” that is, that to which he felt himself to be entitled, as would any king.Indeed, Qohelet’s boasts in these verses are comparable to many texts from the ancient

Near East in which kings boasted of their great accomplishments, building projects, and possessions. Qohelet has become a king like any other king: his accomplishments like their accomplishments, his possessions like their possessions. Perhaps worst of all, his wisdom, originally received as a gift of God (1Ki 3:1 – 15), has now become just like their wisdom:pessimistic, skeptical, and essentially godless.

Two items in the list call for specific comment.In v.7, in addition to buying slaves, Qohelet notes that there were also slaves "born in my house." This no doubt refers to the children born to those who were already slaves, who automatically became the property of the slaveowner (see Ex 21:2 – 11). It is interesting that in the same verse these slaves are mentioned along with flocks and herds. The slaves are just as much property as are the cattle and sheep. One wonders whether Qohelet, who was so concerned about humankind's arduous labor (ʿāmāl) with which he considered himself to be afflicted, was at all concerned about the labor of his slaves and their dreary, meaningless existence.

The other item is the "harem" in v.8. The translation of the text is debated. What is one word in the NIV is actually a singular noun, followed by the conjunction "and," in turn followed by the plural of the same noun (šadda wᵉšaddôt). The meaning of šadda is unclear (see Notes), but many commentators believe it refers to the female breast and is thus a vulgar way of referring to a woman by a part of her body. The phrase then would be translated (less vulgarly) as "a woman and women."

Judges 5:30, a passage that refers to the spoils of war, offers both a somewhat similar grammatical structure and idiomatic usage of an anatomical term. The NIV 's "a girl or two for each man" is more literally "a womb, two wombs for each man" ("womb" itself probably serving as a euphemistic reference to the vagina).

The phrase in Ecclesiastes 2:8, "delights of the heart of man," seems to favor the harem interpretation. If correct, then it is to be noticed that all three elements of what has become a stock expression for a man's "good life" in our culture — i.e., "wine, women, and song"— are present in the passage.

10 – 11 Qohelet summarizes this part of his quest by boasting that he had

spared no expense in financing his experiment. Everything he saw and wanted he took. One is reminded of Eve, who in Genesis 3:7 saw the fruit and took it, and of the "sons of God," who in 6:2 saw the "daughters of men" and "took" (NIV, "married") them. Unbridled taking of whatever one wants does not get good press in the OT; we should not expect differently here. Qohelet did not withhold from himself any "pleasure" (śāmēaḥ, GK 8525), and he declares that he did indeed take "delight" (śāmēaḥ, a word closely related to (śāmēaḥ,and derived from the same root) in the fruit of his labor, and that he does receive a reward, a ḥeleq (usually translated "portion, lot"; GK 2750).

After surveying all of his works, however, he then passes judgment on all of them as meaningless and a chasing after wind. What is especially critical to note with regard to this judgment is that it hangs like a dark cloud over every so-called *carpe diem* passage that follows. Ever before getting to the first such passage at the end of the ch. 2, he declares everything to be *hebel* ("meaningless").Two words that describe what he received from his toil —"pleasure" (śāmēaḥ, and "reward" ḥeleq— are also prominent in the *carpe diem* passages. For example, in 3:22 Qohelet says, "there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot." "Enjoy his work" here is simply the verbal form (śāmēaḥ, of the noun "pleasure" (śāmēaḥ,in 2:10, and "lot" ḥeleq is the same as the word translated in 2:10 as "reward."

In other words, even though several times later in the book Qohelet will recommend that the best thing a person can do is to derive pleasure from his labor (or the fruits of his labor) because that is his lot in life, he declares up front that he himself received pleasure from his labor as his lot in life but considered it all to be meaningless and a chasing after the wind. This shows us that the *carpe diem* passages are really falsely named. The advice to be given in these passages is not so much "seize the day" as it is "here is a palliative for you to take in the light of the painful absurdity of life."

NOTES

1 Qohelet's self-address here is similar to that which takes place in the Egyptian text Dispute between a Man and His Ba [Soul] (see Genre in the introduction).

3 Krüger, 65, makes a comparison between Qohelet's search for good and the answer provided by Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. . . ." Apparently Qohelet either ignored or rejected Micah's answer.

8 There are numerous proposed translations for שִׁדָּה וְשִׁדּוֹת (*šiddâ wᵉšiddôt*). Among the various suggestions for the meaning of שִׁדָּה (*šiddâ*, GK 8721) are "cupbearer" (so LXX), "cups," "spoils," and "concubines" (both with and without any reference to "breast"). More recently, C. L. Seow, 131 – 32, has taken up an older suggestion and argued that the word is actually a postbiblical Hebrew term that means "chest"and that it then in context refers to the containers in which the "delights of the heart of man" are kept; this would then remove the necessity of translating either phrase with a sexual connotation. This interpretation has also been adopted by the NJPS and NJB.

Additionally, the interpretation is influenced by how one understands תַּעֲנוּג (*taʿᵃnûg*, "delights"). The term occurs only five times in the Hebrew Bible, one of them being in Song of Songs 7:7, which refers to the sexual delight that the male character in this song takes in the female character. More generally, it seems in the other places to refer to the idea of luxurious surroundings. In none of its occurrences, however, does it appear to refer to items that would be kept in chests. This, along with the arguments given in the main exposition above, suggests that the idea of a harem best fits the context.

3. Wisdom and Folly (2:12 – 16)

OVERVIEW

Twice already (1:17; 2:2) Qohelet has mentioned investigating and embracing folly. This passage serves to flesh out the results of the investigation.

12 Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom,
and also madness and folly.
What more can the king's successor do
than what has already been done?
13 I saw that wisdom is better than folly,

just as light is better than darkness.

14 The wise man has eyes in his head,
while the fool walks in the darkness;
but I came to realize
that the same fate overtakes them both.

15 Then I thought in my heart,
"The fate of the fool will overtake me also.
What then do I gain by being wise?"
I said in my heart,
"This too is meaningless."

16 For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered;
in days to come both will be forgotten.
Like the fool, the wise man too must die!

12 Almost as though it were an explanation of what it means to consider wisdom, madness, and folly, Qohelet expresses a concern here that has to do with his successor. Unfortunately, the grammatical constructions and syntax of the second half of the verse are extremely difficult, so that we are not quite sure what the concern is. Literally, the text reads something like: "What the man who will come after the king which already they have done it?" Either there is a Hebrew idiom in this verse with which we are unacquainted, or the text has undergone some corruption in transmission. Later in this chapter (v.19) Qohelet laments the absurd possibility of being succeeded by someone who is a fool. Perhaps that should be understood as the concern in v.12 as well.

Another possibility is that he is disturbed that despite his own just-recorded pleasure experiment, which ended in frustration, his successor will be doomed to repeat the experiment with the same results. This, however, is less likely. In the rest of the book, Qohelet's concern is always *with* the successor, never *for* him.

13 – 14 Qohelet announces the results of his wisdom-versus-folly investigation. Wisdom has an advantage, just as light has an advantage over darkness. The wise actually have eyes that they use when they walk; the fool is "completely in the dark." But — and this is the horror of it all for Qohelet — this advantage is only temporary, because the "fate" (*miqreh*, GK 5247) of the one is the fate of the other too. Death will come along as the great leveler and erase all distinctions.

The word *miqreh* just "happens" to occur seven times in Ecclesiastes, always with reference to death. For an excellent discussion on this word and its usage in

the book, see Peter Machinist, “Fate, *miqreh*, and Reason: Some Reflections on Qohelet and Biblical Thought,” in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots: Biblical, Epigraphic, Semitic Studies in Honor of Jonas C. Greenfield* , ed. Ziony Zevit, Seymour Gitin, and Michael Sokoloff (Winona Lake, Ind.:Eisenbrauns, 1995), 159 – 75.

15 – 16 Qohelet, having come to this realization about a common fate for the wise and the foolish, now rhetorically asks what advantage there is to being wise. He provides his own answer by calling it a *hebel* (“meaningless, absurdity”). He also adds to the mix the fact that neither the wise person nor the fool will be remembered for long. Indeed, the NIV’s “in days to come” can be rendered more literally, “already the days are coming”— the wise man and fool have already begun to be forgotten and they haven’t even died yet!

Qohelet holds out only the slimmest of hopes that there is life beyond the grave (see comments on 3:21; 12:7). The only consolation for death is posterity and the possibility of being remembered after one has died. This is little consolation for us today.One is reminded of the line that has been attributed to different people (I first heard it attributed to Woody Allen): “I don’t want to attain immortality through my works; I want to attain immortality by not dying.” For the ancient Israelites, however, the grand majority of whom probably had no concept of an afterlife, being remembered and having descendants was their only hope.

Qohelet, perhaps already in v.12 but certainly later in the book, is deeply concerned about his descendants, with no assurances that they will be wise and not foolish. Here, however, the despair that comes over him concerns the fact that neither the wise man nor the fool will be remembered after they have died. The commonality of their fate is depressing for Qohelet. We could even raise the bar here by bringing up the further depressing fact that sometimes the fool is remembered when the wise person is not. Almost everyone today knows who Adolf Hitler was; very few of us could give the names of more than a handful of the six million Jews who died in his implementation of the “final solution.” Qohelet could live on through his children; but he has no assurance that they will not be fools. He could live on through those who will remember him; but though he’s not even dead yet, he has already begun to be forgotten. Absurdity!

NOTE

12 Perhaps the easiest text-critical suggestion is that a verb such as יַעֲשֶׂה (*ya·ʿaśeh*, "he will do") has somehow dropped out of the text between "what" and the "man." Restoration of the verb would cause the first part of the sentence to read, "What will the man do who will come after the king?" The last part of the verse, however, is still troublesome, especially with the plural verb, "they have done it." Several Hebrew manuscripts do have a singular here; alternatively, the verb could be read impersonally, which would have the practical effect of rendering it passively, "what has been done." For some of the various proposals, see Seow (133 – 34), Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 182 – 83), Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 20), and Longman (96 – 97).

4. Hatred of Life (2:17 – 26)

OVERVIEW

Now, after his royal pleasure quest and weighing of wisdom, Qohelet passes perhaps his most harshly expressed judgment on the human situation that he observes.

17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is
meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 18I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun,
because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. 19And who knows whether he will be
a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my
effort and skill under the sun. This too is meaningless. 20So my heart began to despair over all
my toilsome labor under the sun. 21For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and
skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is
meaningless and a great misfortune. 22What does a man get for all the toil and anxious striving
with which he labors under the sun? 23All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his
mind does not rest. This too is meaningless.

24 A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work.This too, I see,
is from the hand of God, 25for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

26 To the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness, but to the sinner he
gives the task of gathering and storing up wealth to hand it over to the one who pleases God. This
too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

17 Qohelet declares his hatred for life. Longman, 100, suggests that even though he must have meant his life in particular, by not using the personal pronoun "my," the statement carries the "force of suggestion to his readers as well. That is, everybody's life is worth hating."

18 – 21 As well Qohelet declares his hatred for the things he had acquired, for they must be passed on to someone else after his death. The text does not specifically identify this person as a physical descendant, though that appears to be the implication. This hateful situation is exacerbated by the possibility that this heir might be a fool. Being that Solomon is probably the main figure behind the Qohelet character, this is perhaps intended to remind the reader of Solomon's son Rehoboam, who was "foolishly" responsible for the breakup of the kingdom he had inherited from his father (1Ki 12). If indeed, as argued in the introduction, Hezekiah also stands behind the Qohelet persona, then the reader can also remember that Hezekiah's son Manasseh, because of his "foolish" deeds, was responsible for the eventual exile of Judah to Babylon (2Ki 21:1 – 18; 23:26; 24:3 – 4).

The situation causes Qohelet to despair. In v. 20 the text reads literally, "I turned around to despair";the first verb is סבב(GK 6015), the same word used four times in 1:6 to describe the circular, meaningless movements of the wind. Qohelet has not only engaged in activities that are like chasing the wind; he has now become like the wind itself, randomly and absurdly going around in circles (see Perry, 82). He considers it a "great evil" (a more literal rendering of the NIV's "great misfortune") that a wise person can labor for something only to die and to have to turn it over to some fool who has not labored for it.

22 – 23 After his rhetorical question in v.22, where the expected answer seems to be "nothing," Qohelet elaborates that implied answer in v.23. The elaboration is far more than a simple "nothing." His toil not only does not bring the desired result, it brings the exact opposite — and then some! The "pain and grief " that accompany him during the day while he works go home with him at night and accompany him to bed as well. Even at night "his mind does not rest" (lit., "his heart does not lie down").There is no escape from the absurd situation.

24 – 26 Here is the first of the so-called *carpe diem* (“seize the day”) passages. But as noted above in the comments on 1:10 – 11 (see also Message and Purpose in the introduction), these are not really *carpediem* texts; rather, their content is simply the best advice that Qohelet can come up with in the light of life’s absurdity. They are passages of resignation.

The advice is to eat and drink and find satisfaction in one’s work. But he has already told us in 2:10 – 11 that he tried this approach and found it wanting, meaningless. So here he is not by any means turning into a “preacher of joy”; rather, having already pronounced all human activity to be meaningless, he now simply suggests that this activity is perhaps less meaningless than others, whatever consolation that may bring, and acknowledges that any enjoyment that may result is a gift from God.

This acknowledgment raises the question as to whom God gives this gift. As translated in the NIV, God gives it to the one “who pleases him,” but to the “sinner” he gives only the task of gathering and storing, only to have to hand it over to the one who pleases God. (What is gathered the text does not actually say; the NIV supplies the word “wealth.”)

While this issue may seem fairly straightforward, a valid question is whether the contrast Qohelet sets up here is to be seen as ethically differentiated. The term “sinner” (חֹטֶא, GK 2627), though in the OT primarily designating a person engaged in unethical conduct, often refers to someone who has done something deemed offensive by another person but without a specifically ethical connotation. The majority of the most recent major commentaries on Ecclesiastes (e.g., those by Crenshaw, Murphy, Seow, Longman, Fox, and perhaps Krüger) take the position that in Ecclesiastes the term has indeed been emptied of any moral significance: the חֹטֶא is simply someone who has become displeasing to God. Some of the suggested translations, then, are “one who is offensive,” “bungler,” “unlucky one,” “unfortunate one,” or simply “one who is displeasing to God.”

This is a hard issue to decide; certainly, in some other passages in Ecclesiastes where the term is used, it does seem to have moral connotations (e.g., 7:20); but there are others where it does not (e.g., 10:4). In this particular situation, the context would seem to warrant the nonmoral interpretation for two reasons.

First, if indeed the meaning was that righteous people receive their just rewards and wicked people receive punishment as well, it seems strange that Qohelet then refers to it as a *hebel* , an absurdity, at the end of the verse. He always reserves that judgment for situations that do not make sense.But second, he has already mentioned this situation a few verses earlier (vv.18 – 21). Qohelet himself is one who by "wisdom, knowledge, and skill" has amassed things, only to have to hand them over to the one who "pleases God," though he is not sure whether this person is actually wise or a fool.

In this particular context, then, it is probably best to understand these two classes — the "one who pleases God" and the "one who is offensive" — to be in Qohelet's thinking somewhat like a revolving door. The person who has collected things, who was for a short while the one whom God favored, will soon be the one who falls out of favor. He will die and leave all the things for which he has labored to the one to whom God has now transferred his favor. That person may be wise or a fool, but he is also the lucky one whom, for some reason, God has made to be his new favorite. But his unfortunate time will come as well. This, too, is an absurdity.

NOTES

17 The Qal perfect of שָׂנֵא (*śānēʾ*, "hate") is translated by most versions as a simple past tense. But with the prefixed *waw* and in light of the context, it would seem preferable to translate it more along the lines of "So, I came to hate life." Fox, who translates similarly (*Time to Tear Down*, 181), suggests that this was only momentary and that as he goes along "he tempers his frustration with discoveries of good things" (ibid., 184). While this may be true, it must also be noted that Qohelet never explicitly disavows this hatred; it seems more likely that the sense is that he came to hate life and still does.

25 There are various proposals for the meaning of the verb חוּשׁ (*ḥûš*, GK 2591; NIV, "find enjoyment"); a partial list of alternative proposals includes "hurry," "worry," "pity," "consider," "refrain,""be full," "glean," and "drink." Affecting the translation is whether one expects this to be a term complementary to "eat" and thus more closely tied to v.24, or a term providing a contrast to "eat" and thus more closely tied to v.26. See the discussions in Seow, 139 – 40; Fox, *Time*

to Tear Down, 189; Longman, 108 – 9.

"Without him" is actually in the Hebrew text "without me." But along with several Hebrew manuscripts and ancient versions, including the LXX, the third masculine singular suffix seems preferable. The difference has to do with whether the last letter is a י (*yod*) or ו (*waw*), letters that in the older Hebrew scripts were easily confused.

5. A Pretty Poem about Time (3:1 – 8)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet has either borrowed or himself crafted a pretty poem about time, at least well enough that, perhaps aside from the motto-like statement in 1:2, it has become the most famous passage in the book.Yet its attractiveness only serves to seduce the reader into thinking that in some way time is actually manageable and under human control.That delusion will be deconstructed and shattered in the next section. But there are hints of it even in the poem itself. For example, the poem has what appears to be a neat structure of fourteen pairs of opposites, fourteen being twice the perfect number seven. But attempts to make further sense of the pattern have not yielded agreed-upon results, perhaps giving the lie to the poem's perfection.

Perhaps J. A. Loader comes closest in attempting to figure out the pattern and suggesting a rationale for why some pairs start with the positive member and others with the negative. But his structure is dependent on being able to recognize clearly which members are indeed positive and negative ("Qohe-let 3:2 – 8 — A 'Sonnet' in the Old Testament," *ZAW* 81 [1969]: 240 – 42; idem, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* [BZAW; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1979], 11 – 13, 29 – 33; idem, *Ecclesiastes: A Practical Commentary* , trans. John Vriend [Text and Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 33 – 38).But that is not always so easily recognizable; for example in v.5, is "scatter stones" or "gather them"the positive term? In v.7, is it "be silent" or "speak"that constitutes the negative member? Indeed, it may be questioned whether there are any true positives or negatives in the list. No value judgments are made in the poem. Everything is appropriate in its time.

Another way in which the poem seduces the reader is by listing various activities that may be thought to be under human control. For example, we would normally think that a person chooses to plant or to uproot, to tear down or to build, to be silent or to speak. Yet the very first pair in the list, “a time to be born and a time to die,” is normally thought to be outside human control and determined rather by God. By making this pair the first in the list, the author effectively puts a huge question mark over all the other pairs to follow, thus subtly suggesting that even these times aren’t really under our control. A farmer doesn’t really choose the time to plant;rather, it is forced on him by the alternating seasons and by the weather. A person doesn’t choose when to weep or laugh; that is determined by calamity or good fortune. The times are determined by God.They are outside human control or manipulation.

While a structure beyond the simple fourteen pairs of opposites is difficult to discern, this commentary takes the position that there are also pairs of pairs, that is, that there are seven pairings in the list of fourteen pairs, and that each of the seven pairings (which also constitute the seven verses) has some thematic element that connects its pairs to each other.

1 There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
2 a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
3 a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
4 a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
5 a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
6 a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
7 a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
8 a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

COMMENTARY

1 There are two different words for time in v.1, זְמָן (NIV, “time”) and עֵת (NIV, “season”). There is no significantly appreciable difference between them. It is the second of these two words that occurs repeatedly as “time” in vv.2 – 8.

2 The two pairs in this verse have to do with life and death. The NASB more accurately translates לָלֶדֶת as “to give birth” rather than “to be born.”Though it isn’t the exact opposite of “to die,” it is certainly within the thematic range of life and death and also corresponds more closely to “plant”in the second pair (see Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 29).“To uproot”(עָקַר) should not be confused with “reap”or “harvest.” For various reasons, a farmer may decide to uproot a perfectly good plant. God may decide to recall a perfectly good life.

3 These verses relate thematically in terms of constructiveness versus destructiveness. Again, notice that “kill” and “heal” are not exact opposites.(The opposite of “kill” would have been “give life.”)Notice also that the apparently positive/negative polarities have been reversed as compared to v.2.Perhaps the reversal is a subtle way of suggesting that positive versus negative is a matter of perspective.

4 These two pairs have to do with sadness versus gladness. While “weep” and “laugh” are opposites, “mourn” and “dance” are less perfectly so. Notice that these are outside human determination. Weeping and laughing are, for the most part, forced on us by what “happens” to us.

5 The first pair in this first verse presents substantial interpretive problems: What is meant by casting stones? What is meant by gathering them? And which one is positive and which negative? Numerous suggestions have been made; perhaps the most “suggestive” one is that the idiom refers to sexual intercourse, with “stones” referring to the male’s semen. This then makes the terms in the second pair, “embrace” and “refrain,” sexual references as well.

I take the position, however, that the first pair of opposites indicates two different ways of dealing with an enemy. The NASB ’s more correctly translated “throw stones” refers to the throwing of stones at one’s enemy, and the second member refers to the more peaceful action of gathering stones; note how in Genesis 31:46, the two enemies, Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, gathered stones and piled them up to symbolize their covenant of peace (however uneasy

that peace may have been). “Gathering stones” may have become an idiom for attempts at peacemaking.

The second pair in this verse then refers to the same kinds of situations. Sometimes you can settle your differences with an enemy; sometimes you can’t.But the real question is whether a person can reasonably ascertain when to settle and when not to.

6 The two pairs in this verse are related by their oppositions with regard to possessions. In the first pair the opposition has to do with pursuing something not currently in the pursuer’s grasp (without a clear indication as to whether it ever had been) versus giving up the search and considering the object lost (or unattainable). In the second pair the opposition is actual possession of the object versus a decision to throw it away. Crenshaw, 95, perceptively remarks: “This verse especially illustrates futility. If one could only know whether to invest time in a search, or whether the item is irrecoverable! As it is, one always thinks, ‘Perhaps if I had looked harder’ or ‘Why did I not just let it go?’ ”

7 Attempts to see these two pairs as correlating have focused on the idea of mourning. Thus, rending (tearing one’s garments) and silence would accompany mourning; sewing and speaking would indicate the end of the mourning rites. Though this is certainly possible, the actions are not so specific as to demand this interpretation. But if this suggested context is in fact the case, we should again notice that these times are not so much chosen by us as for us.

8 The emotions contrasted in the first pair lead consequentially, though not necessarily inevitably, to the actions in the second pair. The last pair also forms, though not exactly, an inclusio with the first pair in the list. Thus a time of warfare is a time of great death, and certainly it is better to give birth in peacetime than during war. But again, those times are not ultimately under our control.

6. But Time Is Elusive (3:9 – 15)

OVERVIEW

After reciting this poem, Qohelet proceeds to deconstruct any illusions the poetry may have engendered in the reader's mind.

9 What does the worker gain from his toil? 10 I have seen the burden God has laid on men. 11He has
made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot
fathom what God has done from beginning to end. 12I know that there is nothing better for men
than to be happy and do good while they live. 13 T hat everyone may eat and drink, and find
satisfaction in all his toil — this is the gift of God.14 I know that everything God does will endure
forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere
him.

15 Whatever is has already been,
and what will be has been before;
and God will call the past to account.

COMMENTARY

9 – 11 Not content to observe that everything has its appropriate time, Qohelet wants to know what the payout of this knowledge is for the worker in all of his toil. In words nearly identical to 1:13, Qohelet again notes that God has given human beings a "burden" (lit., "a burden with which to burden him"). It is interesting to note that in both places (1:13 and 3:10), the reference to this "burden" or "task" (ʿinyān, GK 6721) comes on the heels of poems, both of which have been mistakenly read by various commentators as celebratory in nature.

In 1:13, the statement follows a poem whose so-called "nature" verses (1:4 – 7) have been regarded by some as a composition that "praises the cosmos as glorious and eternal" (Lohfink, 40; cf. Whybray, 39 – 43; idem, "Ecclesiastes 1.5 – 7 and the Wonders of Nature," *JSOT* 41 [1988]: 105 – 12); but as was pointed out in the exposition, 1:4 – 7 really constitutes a declaration that nature also partakes in absurdity. In the same way, the lilting cadences of the poem in 3:2 – 8, which seem to celebrate the ordered regularity of events occurring at their appropriate times, actually serve only as a setup to explain the burden by which God keeps human beings occupied. In his song "Slip Slidin' Away,"Paul Simon captures well the message of Ecclesiastes 3:11.

God only knows;

God makes his plan;
The information's unavailable
To the mortal man.

God has made everything "appropriate in its time" (NASB; the NIV 's translation of "beautiful"for *yāpeh*is possible but less likely in this wisdom context). But only God knows what those times are. Human beings may be deluded into thinking that they know, because God "has set eternity"(*ʿōlām*) in their hearts, such that they dimly see that there must be some connection between the appropriate times for each activity and God's eternal plan (i.e., between "time and eternity"); "yet they cannot fathom what God has done"; that is, they cannot make the connections —"the information's unavailable to the mortal man." Each activity has its "fitting" time, but God has not seen fit to clue human beings in as to what those fitting times are.

Humans rarely discover the times; rather, the times discover them and come upon them when they least expect. What then is the answer to Qohelet's question? What is the upshot for the worker in all of his toil? Again, Paul Simon catches in modern parlance and context the Qohelet's answer to his own question:

We work our jobs,
Collect our pay,
Believe we're gliding down the highway
When in fact we're slip slidin' away.

12 – 15 In the light of this absurdity, Qohelet gives for the second time in the book his judgment as to the best course of action — to try to enjoy life as much as is possible. But it must be remembered that he has already told us that this cannot really be done — it is like chasing the wind (2:10 – 11). The advice to "do good" in v.12 is not to be taken as an encouragement to engage in selfless, altruistic behavior; rather, the "good" (*ṭôb*) refers to the "good life," enjoyment of the fruit of one's labor. Qohelet acknowledges that the ability to do this is a gift from God. It is clear from the rest of the book, however, that he does not consider himself to be among the recipients. Nor does he hold out hope that there is any formula that guarantees membership among those so gifted.

God has made his plan; there will be no additions or subtractions. God doles out his gifts in this arbitrary manner "so that men will revere him."If he cannot be "figured out," then he cannot be controlled or manipulated. For Qohelet, God is the one who manipulates and who, by the arbitrariness of his giftings, keeps human beings busy guessing, which in turn causes them to fear him.

After repeating in v.15 what he had already said in 1:9 — the repetition itself serving to illustrate the point — Qohelet goes on to say that God "will call the past to account."This last clause is literally,"God seeks what is pursued," and there has been much discussion on the exact meaning. Generally, commentators take the position that the line reinforces the first part of the verse: the reason things happen over and over again is that God keeps recycling the past. Joseph Blenkinsopp has observed that the particular form of the verb "pursued" (see Notes) is only used in the Old Testament with reference to "the action of the wind driving something before it" ("Ecclesiastes 3.1 – 15: Another Interpretation,"*JSOT* 66 [1995]: 63). He then suggests that the word may stand in close connection to the phrase, "chasing after the wind." If so, in addition to the general consensus, there may be the more specific idea that what God causes to happen over and over is the unsatisfying human pursuit of meaning — a "chasing after the wind."

NOTES

11 Michael Fox (*A Time to Tear Down*, 210 – 11) has adopted and cogently defended an earlier suggestion that the Hebrew word for "eternity," עֹלָם (*ʿōlām*), is a textual corruption resulting from a metathesis of the last two consonants and that the word was originally עָמָל (*ʿāmāl*, "labor, toil"; GK 6662), which occurs over twenty times in Ecclesiastes.This *ʿāmāl* would be basically the same as the יְגִיעָן (*yᵉgîʿān*, "burden"; GK 6721) mentioned in v.10. It would indicate the mental labor of the person trying to understand God's works and make sense of life.

Fox notes other places in the OT where *ʿāmāl* refers to mental or emotional anguish (Ps 73:16 [NIV, "oppressive"; note that this is also a wisdom context]; Isa 53:11 [NIV, "suffering"]). He also compares this passage to Ecclesiastes 8:17, which basically says the same thing as 3:11 and where several of the same terms used in 3:11 occur ("what God has done," "find" [the NIV translates as "fathom"

in 3:11 and as “comprehend” in 8:17], “man”) and where the verbal form of עָמַל (ʿāmāl) occurs (the NIV translates as a noun, “Despite all his *efforts*”). This is an attractive suggestion and may well be correct; but in the absence of any textual corroboration from other ancient versions or Hebrew manuscripts, I opt here for the traditional text.

15 נִרְדָּף (*nirdāp*, “past”) is the Niphal masculine singular participle of רָדַף (*rādap*). As noted above, Blenkinsopp observes that all occurrences of this word in the Niphal refer to something being driven by the wind. Of the passages he lists in support, however (Lev 26:36; Job 13:25; 30:15; Ps 83:15[16]; Isa 17:13), in only two (Lev 26:36 and Job 13:25) does the verb actually occur in the Niphal. This notwithstanding, he is probably still correct to see a connection between *nirdāp* and that which humans pursue in their “chasing after the wind.”

7. God’s Test (3:16 – 22)

OVERVIEW

Though these verses are tied to the previous passage by the mention of “a time for every activity”in v.17 and possibly by the opposition of time versus eternity in vv.21 – 22 (though this is not clear), a new set of concepts is introduced, particularly, injustice and the absurdity of a common destiny for humans and animals. Both are connected to the idea in v.18 of God as the divine test-giver.

16 And I saw something else under the sun:
In the place of judgment — wickedness was there,
in the place of justice — wickedness was there.
17 I thought in my heart,
“God will bring to judgment
both the righteous and the wicked,
for there will be a time for every activity,
a time for every deed.”
18 I also thought, “As for men, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals. 19 Man’s fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal.Everything is meaningless. 20All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. 21Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?”
22 So I saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For

who can bring him to see what will happen after him?

COMMENTARY

16 – 17 Qohelet observes injustice. This observation in itself is not particularly striking. What makes it so, however, is that he observes this injustice in the very place where justice is supposed to be performed. Most likely, we are to think here of judgment contexts that would have been the ancient equivalent of our law courts. But in light of the surrounding context, we should probably also consider that in Qohelet's thinking the law court constitutes a microcosm of what he thinks should be a much larger place of justice and righteousness, namely, the world itself, with God as the one who should enforce these concepts. Indeed, justice and righteousness are ultimately the responsibility of the deity (see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* [2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000], esp. 5, 20 – 23, 179 – 214).

Isaiah 5:7 tells how God himself had a complaint similar to that of Qohelet's: "He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." But Qohelet's complaint goes the other direction. He has looked at God's place of justice, the world, and finds wickedness there. He thought (v.17) that God would prove himself to be the righteous judge, believing that in God's ordered set of times there must be one for righteous judgment.But we are left with the impression that he is not so sure. The next verses confirm this impression.

18 – 22 This lack of justice causes Qohelet then to conceive of God as the divine test-giver; it is the examination part of the curriculum whereby God shows humans that they are really no different from animals (see Job 40:15, where God reminds Job that animals and humans were made on the same day; see also the story of Nebuchadnezzar's becoming an animal in Da 4; cf. Pss 49:12; 73:22).Qohelet looks at the animal world and what happens there and is drained of hope. To Jesus' assertion in Matthew 10:29 – 31 that God watches over the sparrows, Qohelet would have replied that the arbitrariness of what actually happens to sparrows — some live longer than others, many of them are killed by wild animals — provides little hope that God is concerned about justice and righteousness in the human sphere or that he actually cares about humanity.

The same is true in death as in life. Animals and humans have the exact same fate; there is no advantage whatsoever for humans when it comes to death. The precise understanding that ancient Israelites would have had about life beyond the grave is hard to discern (see most recently Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*) . Probably their understanding was nebulous, and indeed, passages outside Ecclesiastes suggest that if any such existence was expected at all, it was one that was emotionless and speechless (Pss 6:5; 30:9; 88:10 – 12; Isa 38:18). In any case, Qohelet is highly skeptical of any suggestion that animals and humans might have different fates at their deaths. Thus he holds out little hope that the injustices of this life will be corrected in the next.

So Qohelet recommends in one short *carpe diem* verse (v.22) that, since there is no justice in this life and since no one can show him that there is any hope for justice afterward, the best course for a person is to try to "enjoy his work, because that is his lot." But this advice does not give one great cause for optimism, for, as was pointed out earlier, Qohelet has tried this option already and it didn't work (see comments on 2:10 – 11, 24 – 26). It's not very good advice, but it's all he's got.

NOTE

18 The NIV's "tests them" for the MT's לְבָרָם (*lᵉbārām*) assumes, along with most modern translations, that the verb is a Qal infinitive construct of בָּרַר (*bārar*, GK 1405). Elsewhere, this verb usually means "to choose, separate, purify, prove, distinguish." Interestingly, the LXX translates the word with διακρίνω (*diakrinō*, "to judge"), the same verb used earlier in v.17. If this is indeed the sense, then it provides an ironic statement ("God will judge all right, he'll judge us to be like animals!"). Fox, without endorsing it, calls attention to the earlier conjecture of Arnold Ehrlich that the word be divided and repointed as לֹא בָרָם (*lō' bārām*, "did not distinguish"); that is, God did not distinguish humans as different from animals (*A Time to Tear Down*, 216).This suggestion has the advantage of providing a finite verb for the sentence. Whichever suggestion one adopts, the basic sense of the verse seems to be the same.

For the MT's וְלִרְאוֹת (*wᵉlirʾōt*,"to see"; Qal infinitive construct), it is probably best to read it as a Hiphil (along with several ancient versions, including the LXX),

explained either by the possibility that the ה has accidentally dropped out in transmission or by the phenomenon known as syncope or apocopation, the loss of one or more letters at the beginning of a word (characteristic of later Mishnaic Hebrew; see Seow, 167). The NIV opts for understanding humans rather than God as subject (so also Whybray, 78), though that would be a grammatically awkward shift of subject.

8. Oppression, or "In Praise of the Dead and the Unborn" (4:1 – 3)

OVERVIEW

Chapter 4 contains several passages that are only loosely connected to each other. One motif that does connect them — however loose that connection may be — is the idea of the "better third" or "three is better." In 4:1 – 3, a third category of persons (the unborn) is declared better off than the living or the dead. In 4:4 – 6, a third attitude toward labor is commended rather than over-industriousness or laziness. In 4:7 – 12, three strands are better than two. And in 4:13 – 16, if one adopts the "three-character" scenario (see below), the third person in the royal succession has the advantage, at least temporarily, over the two who preceded him. Graham Ogden ("The Mathematics of Wisdom: Qoheleth iv 1 – 12," *VT* 34 [1984]: 446 – 53) has also called attention to this phenomenon but has not extended his observation to the last pericope.

1 Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun:
I saw the tears of the oppressed —
and they have no comforter;
power was on the side of their oppressors —
and they have no comforter.
2 And I declared that the dead,
who had already died,
are happier than the living,
who are still alive.
3 But better than both
is he who has not yet been,
who has not seen the evil
that is done under the sun.

COMMENTARY

1 Having already introduced the idea of injustice, Qohelet goes on to the topic of oppression.He laments the tears of those who are oppressed, and especially their lack of solace. The twofold occurrence of the phrase “they have no comforter”ties this section closely to the previous one, where in 3:16 the phrase “and wickedness was there” also occurs twice. This literary connection also argues against those who advocate the deletion, in either text, of the repeated phrase.

2 In the light of the observed oppression, Qohelet “declares” that those who have died “are happier” than those who are alive. The verb the NIV translates “declares . . . are happier” is *šābaḥ*, and in most of its other occurrences in the OT it carries the idea of praise (e.g., Ps 63:3, “glorify”; 117:1, “extol”; 145:4, “commend”; 147:12, “glory”). In context, perhaps the NASB’s “congratulated” better captures the nuance.

Additionally, however, in at least three occurrences the verb carries the idea of calming, soothing, or restraining. In Psalms 65:7 and 89:9 it refers to the stilling of the seas; in Proverbs 29:11 it describes the wise man, who “controls” or calms himself, in contrast to the fool, who “gives full vent to his anger.” The word in these instances is most likely a different word altogether but is comprised of the same root letters in Hebrew. This gives rise to the intriguing possibility that a double entendre may be in play here. Qohelet laments the fact that those who are oppressed have no comforter.Now Qohelet plays the role of both congratulator *and* comforter. The irony, of course, is that now that the oppressed have died, they are in no position to accept the congratulations, and there is no longer need for consolation.

But that is exactly Qohelet’s point: there is no consolation to be had in this life or the next. One is reminded of the first question in the Heidelberg Catechism: “What is your only comfort in life and death?” As opposed to the glorious answer provided by the catechism, “That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and death to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ,” Qohelet’s answer is, “There is no comfort in life, and in death the only comfort there is comes too late and cannot even be experienced or felt.”

This leads him to suggest that the best congratulations are reserved for those

who have not yet been born. Seow, 187, perceptively notes, “The alternative of not having lived is not an option that people can choose.” The verse, then, “points to the irony of human existence: what is really ‘better’ in this regard is not within the grasp of mortals.People, by their very existence, have already been assigned their lot.” Thus Qohelet constructs a hierarchy of happiness and contentment: the dead are in the middle, the living are at the bottom, and the unborn are at the top — and none of them gets to choose their position.

NOTE

2 וַֽיְשַׁבְּחוּ (*wa·yə·šab·bə·ḥū*)is a Piel infinitive absolute of שָׁבַח (*šā·ḇaḥ*), which normally means “to praise,” as noted above. Here the word acts as a finite verb, and there is no need to emend it in form to a perfect. It occurs only eleven times in the Hebrew Bible, though there are five occurrences in the Aramaic portion of Daniel. Most lexicons assign the occurrences to two different roots, with eight assigned to one (“praise”) and three to the other (“still”). Most definitely, the first meaning is the one intended by the author in 4:2, as well as in 8:15. But the idea of a double entendre, withשָׁבַח serving as a wordplay synonym of the participle of נָחַם (*nā·ḥam*, “comfort”) in v.1, is a real possibility.

9. Laziness versus Over-industriousness (4:4 – 6)

4 And I saw that all labor and all achievement spring from man’s envy of his neighbor.This too is
meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

5The fool folds his hands
and ruins himself.

6 Better one handful with tranquility
than two handfuls with toil
and chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

4 – 6 In these verses Qohelet contrasts two attitudes toward labor and what it achieves, and then he suggests a third, mediating option. First he observes that all work and achievement is motivated by envy, a desire to keep up with — or rather surpass — one’s neighbors in possessions and status. After declaring work

so motivated as meaningless, he then provides a contrast in the case of the fool who “folds his hands” (cf. Pr 6:10; 24:33) and “ruins himself.”

As opposed to both of these attitudes, he suggests a middle way in v.6. Skillfully, he repeats from the first example in v.4 the term ʿāmāl (translated by the NIV as “labor” in v.4 and “toil” in v.6) and the phrase “chasing after the wind.” For the second example in v.5, he substitutes two terms, *kap* and kōpen (both translated “handful”), for the word “hand” (*yad*). In this way he recalls both attitudes and suggests a third that is better, something in between: Strive, but don’t strive too much. One handful is certainly better than none (in which case you die); but one is also better than two, if to get two you never have time to rest.

NOTES

4 There is some debate about the proper translation of כִּשָּׁרוֹן (kišrôn) that is reflected in the translations of the NIV and NASB: “achievement” versus “skill.”The term occurs only three times in Ecclesiastes (2:21; 4:4; 5:11[10]).The exact meaning is ambiguous in 2:21 and 4:4, but it definitely refers to success in 5:11 (NIV, “benefit”). Whichever translation one opts for, the meaning of the passage is not measurably affected.

5 Instead of the meaning adopted above for the idiom “consumes his own flesh,” a minority of commentators (e.g., Lohfink, 69 – 70) suggests that the verse actually commends the fool, so that the sense of the passage is that in spite of his laziness, the fool still has meat to eat. The fool is then further commended in v.6 as the one who has a “handful with tranquility.”Though Qohelet sometimes acknowledges that the wise and the industrious appear to have no advantage over the fool, he never recommends a fool’s behavior.Also, as Fox points out (*Time to Tear Down,* 220), the phrase “his flesh” (or “its flesh,” בְּשָׂרוֹ, bĕśārô) never refers to one’s food but rather to one’s own body.

10. Aloneness versus Companionship (4:7 – 12)

7 Again I saw something meaningless under the sun:

8 There was a man all alone;

he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
“For whom am I toiling,” he asked,
“and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?”
This too is meaningless —
a miserable business!

9 Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work:

10 If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

12 Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

COMMENTARY

7 – 8 Qohelet now lists and contrasts three situations: singleness, companionship, and “threeness.”In v.8, “there was a man all alone” is literally, “there was one and there was not a second.” Exactly who this nonexistent second person was supposed to have been is not clear. Many commentators have argued that the concern is for a successor (i.e., a “son”), or at least some relative (i.e., a “brother”) who could inherit the estate. But Qohelet has already declared absurd the whole concept of amassing possessions only to pass them down to someone (2:17 – 21), so it seems strange if he would here lament the lack of an heir. More likely, the referent is a wife, a work partner, or just a friend, who could provide companionship.

There was no end to this person’s labor, however, nor was there an end in sight to his dissatisfaction.Qohelet then takes up this person’s lament in the first person (“he asked” is not in the text). Is Qohelet quoting this loner? Is he sympathetically describing this person’s situation? Or has Qohelet actually been describing his own situation? Whatever the case, he categorizes this unfortunate circumstance to be an absurdity, an “evil business.”

9 – 12 Qohelet now moves on to discuss the advantages of “two” over “one”

and lists four of them:Two get a better return on their labor; if one of them falls the other can provide assistance; two can help each other stay warm; and two can more easily ward off attackers.

Possibly the last three advantages, and perhaps even the first one, are to be associated with travel.Journeys were more hazardous in the ancient Near East than is generally the case today. Those who journeyed by themselves were at significantly greater risk than those who traveled in pairs or larger groups. A person might fall into a pit or over a cliff and would need someone to help him up.Travelers could provide greater warmth at night by huddling together. Bandits who would think nothing of attacking solitary persons might think it best not to attack those traveling in pairs.

This last observation then leads Qohelet to observe that three are even better. One version of the Gilgamesh Epic, with which Ecclesiastes has other similarities, has the line, “No man will cut the three-ply cord” (see discussion in Fox, *Time to Tear Down* , 223 – 24; Longman, 143; Seow, 189).Ecclesiastes may have been influenced in some way by this text, or the lines in both texts may be indicative of the saying’s larger popularity.

Though Qohelet does not finish this section off with a *hebel* -judgment (“meaningless”), Seow, 189 – 90, correctly reminds us that the main thing to note here is that “because life’s journey is difficult and perilous, it is better that one not face it alone. It is not that there is absolute certainly in numbers.The benefit is rather, only relative. All advantages are only relative for Qohelet.” Qohelet gives good advice. But the world in which that advice is to be employed is still meaningless.

11. Wisdom, Folly, and Succession (4:13 – 16)

OVERVIEW

In a book that is already hard to understand, there are few passages more difficult than this one.Complicating the interpretation are grammatical difficulties, syntax problems, and especially the use of pronouns without clear

antecedents or referents.Indeed, the NIV and NASB appear to reflect two different theories as to how many actual characters there are in the passage. The NIV appears to support what has been a traditional understanding that there are two characters: the old king and a youth who replaces him. The NASB, with the phrase in v.15 “the second lad,” seems to lean toward seeing three characters: the old king, a youth who replaces him, and a second youth who replaces the first youth.

In recent years, the tendency has been for commentators to opt for the three-character scenario, as represented by the commentaries of Crenshaw, Lohfink, Longman, Murphy, Ogden, Whybray, and Krüger. Among those still advocating two characters are commentaries by Eaton, Garrett, Gordis, and Provan, as well as articles by Dominic Rudman (“A Contextual Reading of Ecclesiastes 4:13 – 16,” *JBL* 116 [1997]: 57 – 73) and Addison Wright (“The Poor But Wise Youth and the Old But Foolish King (Qoh 4:13 – 16),” in *Wisdom,You Are My Sister: Festschrift for Roland Murphy* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1997], 142 – 54). More recently, Fox in his commentary has even advocated a four-character scenario, with two different youths being mentioned in v.14 and a third youth in v.15.

Complicating the search for a solution is the question as to whether the main subject of v.14 is the old king, the youth, or, in Fox’s scenario, two youths. Another question is whether there are actual historical persons to whom Qohelet is making reference. Taking the two-character scenario as an example, only a few of the suggestions as to who these two characters may have been include: Pharaoh and Joseph, Saul and David, Solomon and either Rehoboam and Jeroboam, and either Nebu-chadnezzar or Belshazzar and Daniel. There have been a number of extrabiblical historical persons who have been suggested as well.

Because of the lack of a consensus, the interpretation given below is provisional and tentative.Nevertheless, on account of the motif mentioned above that seems to tie together loosely the passages in this chapter — that of the “better third” or “three is better” — I opt for the three-character scenario.Also, in the light of my belief that Qohelet is a composite character representing the Davidic dynasty as a whole, but especially Solomon and Hezekiah, the suggestion is advanced here, without arguing that the characters in the passage can be directly identified with specific persons in the biblical narrative, that there are allusions to the succession narratives concerning those two kings, as well as

issues with regard to wisdom and folly that arise in those two narratives.

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. 14 The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. 15 I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. 16 There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

13 The first verse seems to be fairly clear. Qohelet indicates that better than an old but foolish king is a youth who is wise but poor (or "a commoner";so Seow, 183). To be noted here is how this seems to upset the traditional idea in Wisdom literature that wisdom comes with age.

14 The majority of commentators take the position that the youth is the one whose accession to the throne is being described. So the youth is the one who may have come to be king after being in prison or having come from an impoverished situation. Whether we are to understand that the old king was responsible for either the youth's imprisonment or poverty is impossible to determine.

15 Qohelet observes that the subjects of the kingdom followed "the youth, the king's successor"(so NIV; NASB, "the second lad who replaces him"). Literally, the Hebrew text reads, "the youth, the second." This could be understood appositionally, namely, "the youth, that is, the second," with the understood "first" being the old king.Thus one arrives at a two-character scenario. But grammatically it seems more natural to read the construction simply as a noun followed by an attributive adjective, that is, "the second youth," with the understood "first" being the youth mentioned earlier. So the order thus far is (1) an old, foolish king, (2) succeeded by a wise youth, (3) who is in turn succeeded by a second youth, for whom there is no specific characterization given in the text.

16 The first part of this verse is difficult grammatically and syntactically. The NIV opts for a translation that understands the subject of the verb *hāyā*("were") to

be one set of people who are contrasted to another group of people who were temporally before them. An alternative for the grammar is to understand that the subject of the verb is not the people but the king, thus resulting in the following translation: “There was no end to all the people, to all before whom he was,” that is, the people over whom he reigned as king. In other words, he was immensely popular. The first, wise youth has been forgotten, and now this second youth (was he a wise man or a fool? maybe it doesn’t matter) had a huge following. But then the verse goes on to say that this king, too, fell out of favor with the people. Then Qohelet brings in his *hebel*-judgment: this is an absurdity.

REFLECTION

In ch. 4 are four passages loosely tied together by the idea of “three.” As well, the last two passages (vv.7 – 12 and 13 – 16) are also connected by the use of the word “second” (שֵׁנִי) in vv.8, 10, and 15.Qohelet is on a search to find out what is good.Here he experiments with math. Two are better than one and three are better than two. “Two is good, three’s a charm.”

But in this last vignette Qohelet throws a cloud over the whole mathematical enterprise. “Second”was a good thing in vv.7 – 12, but the “second” in this last passage only ushers in an absurd situation. And indeed this “second,” who is also the third character in this story, falsifies Qohelet’s theory. At first it looks as though wisdom has triumphed. A wise youth has replaced a foolish old king. But then a second youth replaces him and gains immense popularity, and the first youth is forgotten. But then this second youth falls out of favor as well. As Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 41) remarks, “This is another defeat for wisdom (the youth ‘poor but wise’). In effect, the observation of v.13 has been controverted by the story in vv.14 – 16.” So Qohelet’s earlier observation in 1:11 still holds:“There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow.” Absurdity!

12. Fools in God’s Presence (5:1 – 7 [4:17 – 5:6])

OVERVIEW

In these verses Qohelet gives advice regarding proper behavior in God's presence. At first sight this passage seems to be fairly discrete, with no clear connections to the passages that precede and follow it. But in the introductory comments for the next section (5:8 – 20), I will suggest a connection between vv.1 – 7 and the rest of the chapter.

Please remember that the verse enumeration in the Hebrew is slightly different from the English. The Hebrew enumeration is noted in square brackets.

> 1 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.
>
> 2 Do not be quick with your mouth,
> do not be hasty in your heart
> to utter anything before God.
> God is in heaven
> and you are on earth,
> so let your words be few.
>
> 3 As a dream comes when there are many cares,
> so the speech of a fool when there are many words.
>
> 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools;fulfill your vow. 5 It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. 6 Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

1[4:17] Qohelet warns that one should be on guard when entering God's house and should be sure to listen rather than to offer the kind of sacrifice a fool might offer. By designating listening as the more appropriate thing to do in God's presence, the implication is that the "sacrifice of fools" is excessive talk; this implication becomes explicit in v.2.

Various interpretations have been given of the last part of the verse, of which a more literal translation would be, "for none of them knows to do evil." Some commentators have suggested that this means that fools are so stupid that they do not know "how" to do evil. But more likely this refers to fools' ignorance of their culpability and of the inappropriateness of verbosity in God's presence. Seow, 195, cites an interesting parallel from an Akkadian-Hurrian fourteenth-century BC inscription (text in *BWL*, 116):

One who acknowledges no guilt rushes to
his god,
Without thinking he quickly raises his hand
(in prayer) to the god.
.. . his guilt. . .
A man in ignorance rushes to his god.

The idea is that to avoid looking like a fool, one should speak as little as possible in the deity's presence. We may also be reminded of Alexander Pope's famous line, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

2[5:1] Qohelet is now more explicit. While operating with speed and haste can sometimes be good, that principle never applies to speaking in the divine presence. Careful thought should always precede speech in any situation; how much more so when it comes to speech uttered before God.Interestingly, the reason given is that when you are in God's presence, you are really not in his presence — you are still on earth, but God is in heaven. In other words, do not by your excessive talk give the impression that somehow you think you "have arrived." The gap between you and God will always be an infinite one.

Fox (*Time to Tear Down* , 231) suggests as well that the distinction calls attention to God's omniscience, his heavenly vantage point that allows him to see and foresee all things, "while man's horizon is constricted and does not permit him to know what eventualities may keep him from paying his vows."But the idea of vows is not specifically mentioned until v.3, and it seems more likely that at this point the warning concerns any speech before God, not just that which is vow-related.

3[2] While the dream to which Qohelet refers may not specifically be a nightmare, it is at least a restless one brought about by a *rōb ʿinyān* (lit., "multiplicity of business"; NIV, "many cares"). "Cares" is the same word as that translated "burden" in 1:13 and "grief " in 2:23. Indeed, 2:23 may be directly relevant here: "All his days his work is pain and grief [*ʿinyān*]; even at night his mind does not rest."In the second line, though Fox is correct that there is no direct causation, inasmuch as a multiplicity of words is not the cause of the fool's speech, one can still speak of causation with regard to demonstration; that is, a multiplicity of words demonstrates that their producer is a fool. The comparison therefore is an apt one.

4 – 7[3 – 6] Now Qohelet moves on specifically to speech uttered while making a vow. The reader is warned not to be rash. The making of vows was a regular part of the worship of ancient Israel (see, e.g., Lev 7:16; 22:17 – 21; 23:38; 27:1 – 12; Nu 30:1 – 16; Dt 23:21 – 23; Pss 22:25; 50:14; 61:8; 66:13; 76:11; 116:14, 18). From the passages in Psalms it seems that vows were regularly made in prayers of lament and that the psalmist often vowed to do or pay (sacrifice) something if his prayer were answered. The warning here, which resembles closely Deuteronomy 23:21 – 23, is that one should either be prompt in fulfilling the vow or refrain from making the vow in the first place. While not making the vow may appear to make you look stingy, the vow and subsequent nonpayment make you look like a fool; God takes no delight in fools.

The NIV's addition of the word "temple" to describe the messenger, while possibly correct, masks a certain ambiguity in the text. The word for "messenger" is *malʾāk*(GK 4855), which is also the Hebrew for "angel." One interpretation — that adopted by the NIV and probably the majority of commentators — is that the messenger is a temple representative whose job it may have been to collect on such vows.

Alternatively, *malʾāk* can be understood as referring to an angel of God. The LXX actually translates this word as "God" (*theos*). While it can be argued that this was simply interpretive on the part of the LXX's translator, Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 232) argues for an extremely literal Greek translator working from a Hebrew text that had *ʾĕlōhîm* ("God") rather than *mal,ak* m and that this is the original reading. This interpretation finds support from the consequence for telling this messenger that his "vow was a mistake," namely, that God himself will rage against the vower's voice and destroy his property. In my opinion, it is not likely that the Hebrew text originally had "God,"but rather that in this particular instance the LXX is being interpretive, and perhaps correctly so. It is possible that the ambiguity in the Hebrew may be intentional.

After again bringing "dreams" into the picture and declaring that a lot of dreaming and a lot of words are meaningless, Qohelet concludes in v.7 by advising the reader to fear God. The NIV's "stand in awe of God," while in some ways acceptable, sounds too much like our modern language of worship. Qohelet is not talking about worship, nor does he mean what the frame-narrator

means in 12:13 when he says “fear God,” though he uses the identical words. Having just mentioned in 5:6 that God “may be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands,” Qohelet’s admonition here is not that one should have a “reverential” fear of God but that one should be truly afraid of God.

I have titled this section “Fools in God’s Presence.” I have titled another passage later in the book (8:1 – 9) “Fools in the King’s Presence.” My intention in giving these passages similar titles is to highlight that Qohelet’s advice to “fear” God is not much different from the advice he gives later as to how to relate to the king.

Moreover, passages such as 10:4, 20 should also be considered. The similarity between 5:6 and 10:20 is particularly striking. In 5:6 the messenger will hear what you say, and God will punish you; in 10:20 the advice is, “Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom, because a bird of the air may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.”Qohelet advises the reader to fear God in the same way that one should fear the king. This includes being afraid of him, obeying his commands, and behaving circumspectly in his presence.

But in no way can Qohelet be said either to have himself had, or recommended that his reader have, any kind of emotional attachment to the deity.The behavior before God that he encourages is motivated by fear, not by depth of devotion. Qohelet may have considered himself to be God’s subject, servant, and maybe even his sycophant, but not his devotee.

NOTES

1[4:17] “Draw near” is a Qal infinitive absolute of קָרַב (*qānab*) . Among the various options, it seems best to regard it as taking the place of an imperative, taking its aspect from the preceding imperative, “guard.”

6[5:5] “A mistake” is שְׁגָגָה (*šᵉgāgâ*), which in the Levitical legislation has reference to sins committed unintentionally (e.g., see Lev 4:2; 5:15, 18; Nu 15:24 – 29).

Two possibilities in this verse are that either the person is saying that the vow was a mistake, or that the nonpayment was a mistake, an oversight. The latter seems more likely.

7[6] The syntax of the first half of this verse is difficult. Literally it reads,"For in a multiplicity of dreams and absurdities and many words," with no explicit verb, nor is it easy to imply a verb of being. Several solutions have been given, including rearranging the words and dropping one or more of the conjunctions; no consensus has emerged. I prefer the translation of Crenshaw, 114, which treats the first half of the verse as a setting for the command in the last half: "Yes, in a multitude of dreams and futility and many words — still fear God."

13. Oppression and Politics, Poverty and Wealth (5:8 – 20 [5:7 – 19])

OVERVIEW

Here Qohelet touches on a number of topics, as suggested in the heading above. A possible connection between this passage and the previous one is the relationship between the role of God in vv.1 – 7 and the king in v.9. Both get their share of the profits, one way or another, and Qohelet may well consider God's taking of his share to be as oppressive as the moneygrabbing of the officials and the king in vv.8 – 9. Again, we must emphasize that while Qohelet fears God, respects him, and in some measure even guards his honor, there is no evidence to suggest that he loves him; rather, he sees God as in some way being the source of the oppressive burdens under which he suffers.

It should also be noted that the larger section to which these verses belong (5:8 – 6:9) seems to be chiastic in form. Daniel Fredericks appears to have been the first to notice this structure ("Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9 – 6:9," *JBL* 108 [1989]: 17 – 35). Seow, 216 – 17, has analyzed it as follows (in a slightly different format and with abbreviated wording):

A 5:8 – 12 (poor, not satisfied, accomplishment, seeing of the eyes)
B 5:13 – 17 (sired a son, going as he came, eats in darkness)
C 5:18 – 19 (good, God has given, this is a gift)
D 5:20 (does not remember [or reflect] much; occupied with gladness of

heart)
C’ 6:1 – 2 (evil, God gives, this is a sickness)
B’ 6:3 – 6 (sires a hundred, came . . . went, goes in darkness)
A’ 6:7 – 9 (afflicted, not satisfied, advantage, seeing of the eyes)

As one can see from the chiasm, its center (5:20) is perhaps the key verse of the passage. As such, it notes the desirability of being one of those who do not have to reflect so much on life because God keeps them “occupied with gladness of heart.” Qohelet himself, however, is not a member of that club.

8 If you see the poor oppressed in a district, and justice and rights denied, do not be surprised at such things; for one official is eyed by a higher one, and over them both are others higher still. 9 The increase from the land is taken by all; the king himself profits from the fields.

10 Whoever loves money never has money enough;
whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.
This too is meaningless.

11 As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.And what benefit are they to the owner
except to feast his eyes on them?

12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether he eats little or much,
but the abundance of a rich man
permits him no sleep.

13 I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:

wealth hoarded to the harm of its owner,
14 or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when he has a son
there is nothing left for him.

15 Naked a man comes from his mother’s womb,
and as he comes, so he departs.
He takes nothing from his labor
that he can carry in his hand.

16 This too is a grievous evil:

As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?

17 All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.

18 Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him — for this is his lot. 19 Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work — this is a gift of God. 20 He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart.

COMMENTARY

8 – 9[7 – 8] Qohelet says there is no reason to be shocked by oppression; for there is an established bureaucracy that sees that everyone gets his cut. The NIV's "surprised" is *tam*m *ah*m which, in most of its other occurrences in the OT, refers not only to surprise but also to shock and dismay at a negative situation. Perhaps the admonition here is not just to expect these oppressive situations but also not to be dismayed at them. Numbness is the preferred reaction.

The word translated as "official' is *gāḇōah*, and though this translation has become customary, Seow, 203 – 4, correctly notes that elsewhere in the OT the word never carries this meaning but instead simply refers to people or things that are high, many times meaning "proud" or "arrogant."Perhaps in this context a translation such as our term "higher-ups," with its usually negative connotation, best catches the nuance. So while they may not necessarily be officials, they are at least in powerful enough positions that they are able to oppress the poor with impunity. They constitute a chain, with the king himself being at the top.

The NIV's translation for v.9, while being somewhat interpretive, is nevertheless on the right track. All, including the king, get their share of the poor person's profits, and to ensure that this system continues, they "guard" each

other. It is not clear whether this means that they protect each other's interests or that they keep watch to make sure their subordinates don't attempt to take more of a cut than they should. Either way, the poor come out on the bottom.

10 – 12[9 – 11] Qohelet turns from the plight of the poor to the plight of the rich — possibly the ones who oppress the poor. Their greed, even if fed by oppression and exploitation of the poor, is insatiable, and that is indeed an absurdity — that which they stole from others fails to satisfy even them.Why? Because it is not only the goods that increase, but the consumers increase as well.

These "consumers" have been variously understood as those who levy taxes, those who provide services for the rich and then bill them, the increased staff of servants, the extended household (including those who somehow "worm" their way into the household), and even the rich lovers of money themselves (for this last one see Seow, 205, 219 – 20). Speaking perhaps somewhat overstatedly, Qohelet laments that these owners never really get to enjoy their possessions, only look at them — and, we may suppose, try to figure out how to keep them. The poor laborer has at least one advantage over the rich man: either because he doesn't have the same cares or because he is too tired to do otherwise, his sleep is sweet.

13 – 17[12 – 16] A story is now used to illustrate a point. Qohelet refers to the story as a "sickening evil" (*rāʿâ ḥôlâ*; perhaps better than "grievous"); the story turns his stomach. In v.13 it is unclear as to exactly how the "hoarded" wealth (though "hoarded" is perhaps too pejorative a translation; better simply "guarded" or "stored up" wealth) brings harm to the owner; several scenarios could be envisaged. Most likely what is meant is that the owner, by storing up his wealth to pass down to his son, sacrificed the comfort that his wealth could have provided for himself. More pertinent, however, is what happens next.Through some misfortune — whether it is the owner's fault is not indicated and is thus irrelevant — he loses his wealth, sires the son he wanted, but now has nothing to pass down to him.

There is some debate as to who is being described in v.15 — the father or the son. Most likely, because of the mention of this person's "labor," it refers to the father. In any case, he comes into the world "naked" (*ʿārôm*). . The word recalls

both the original state of humankind in Genesis 2:25 as well as Job's comparable statement in Job 1:21. Indeed, Qohelet may be parodying Job's statement. He agrees with Job that humans come into the world naked and go out the same way. He agrees that it is God who gives and takes away (again, notice that no blame is assigned to the man in this passage). But he has nothing comparable to Job's "blessed be the name of the LORD ." Qohelet fears God; he never praises him.

In vv.16 – 17, we probably have a more general extrapolation rather than a continuation of the example. Human beings come as they go. They toil and reap nothing but wind. They eat in darkness. Perhaps we should think again of the above-mentioned example, that the man, in storing up his wealth, ate his food in darkness in order to avoid unnecessary expenditures and pass down as much as possible to his son. More likely, however, along with Seow, 207 – 8, we should understand "eat" to be metaphorical for "earning a living" (cf. Am 7:12, where the NIV correctly translates "earn your bread" for the more literal Hebrew expression, "eat bread").

If this is the interpretation, "darkness" becomes a metaphor for the context in which one spends all of one's life. Those days are also spent in "frustration, affliction [or 'sickness,' the nominal form of the adjective 'sick' in v.13], and anger." What does this example illustrate? You would think storing up wealth to pass down to your children would be a good thing. And perhaps it is — if God allows you to do so. But there are no guarantees. And as sorry as Qohelet was for the poor persons in vv.8 – 9, he is just as upset (to his stomach) for the rich person in this story. It is indeed a sickening evil.

18 – 20[17 – 19] In this, the fourth of the so-called *carpe diem* passages (see Message and Purpose in the introduction), Qohelet again declares what he has found to be good: that it is appropriate for humans to eat, drink, and take pleasure in the fruits of their labor. The days in which this can be done will be few. And when a person is able to do so, he should recognize the opportunity as a gift from God.

But again, we must call attention to the fact that there is nothing humans can do to "seize" these days. If God favors you so as to grant this as your lot in life, that's great. But it is just as likely that he will withhold these gifts from you, as

illustrated in the cases of the oppressed poor people in vv.8 – 9 and the rich person in vv.10 – 17. And the decision to give or to withhold will be made without regard to any merit or fault on your part. But even for those who are so gifted, as Qohelet at one point considered himself to be (2:10 – 11), the verdict over the whole is still *hebel* — "meaningless."

The central verse of this larger chiastic section (5:9 – 6:9) is v.20. The ones favored by God with wealth, possessions, and joy in the fruits of their labor do not have to reflect much on life, because God keeps them "occupied with gladness of heart." But one gets the feeling that this declaration, which on the surface seems to congratulate these kinds of people, ultimately becomes a judgment on those whom Qohelet really considers to be shallow minded.

Qohelet himself knew what it was to be wealthy, and he too enjoyed the fruit of his labor, but he regarded it as ultimately meaningless and a chasing after the wind (2:10 – 11). And instead of "gladness of heart," God kept him occupied with the "heavy burden" (1:13; 3:10) of reflecting endlessly on the days of his life (which is the very reason we have this book!). If these carefree, nonreflective people actually exist — and it is possible that Qohelet doesn't believe they do — then he is confident that they will one day join his own ranks. For that, too, is a gift of God.

NOTES

9[8] The syntax and grammar of this verse is difficult. Literally it seems to read, "And the profit of a land is this — a king for a served field." There are numerous suggestions for how this is to be understood, as well as various proposed textual emendations, some of which omit the word "king." One crucial issue has to do with whether "served," נֶעֱבָד (*neʿĕbād*) , refers to the "king" or the "field." If "king," then the last part of the verse would read, "a king by a field is served." Perhaps the best way to understand the verse is as a sarcastic statement. Everybody gets a cut of the profit. And the profit for the people who actually work the land? They get a king who is either over the field or is served by the field. The field, ultimately, is for him.

17[16] It is common on the part of translations and commentaries to go with

the ancient versions against the MT and read the last line of this verse as containing three nouns. The MT literally reads,“and he is greatly frustrated, and his sickness, anger.” The changes are fairly simple ones: (1) the verb וְכָעַס (*wᵉkāᶜas* and he is frustrated”) is repointed to the nominal form וְכַעַס (*wᵉkaᶜas,'* frustration”); and (2) the third masculine singular suffix in the word “his sickness” is deleted and the word repointed accordingly (the *waw* suffix probably being a dittography from the *waw* on the front of the next word). This is to be preferred over the MT.

18[17] I agree with several commentators (Longman, Seow, and Fox [at least in his earlier commentary, *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, though he has changed his view somewhat in his more recent work, *Time to Tear Down*]) that the phrase טוֹב אֲשֶׁר־יָפֶה (*ṭôb ʾᵃšer-yāpeh,* “the good which is proper”) should be read with the relative אֲשֶׁר serving either as a kind of colon or a substitute for כִּי (*kî,'*that" . This results in the following reading: “Then I realized what is good: that it is appropriate. . . .”

20[19] Most translations and commentators take מַעֲנֶה (*maᶜᵃneh,* “keeps occupied”) as a Hiphil participle of עָנָה (*ᶜānâ*) III, “to occupy” (GK 6701). Lohfink, 84 – 85, however, prefers to take it as עָנָה I, “to answer” (GK 6699), and translates the last part of the verse as “God continuously answers through the joy in one’s heart.”

For several reasons, “occupy” or “keep occupied” appears to be more applicable in this context. First, the previous two occurrences of this verb in Ecclesiastes (1:13; 3:10), while possibly relating either to עָנָה III or hn:[; II (“to humble”), are definitely not instances of עָנָה I, as Lohfink acknowledges. Second, “answer” seems to be foreign to the context in 5:20.The person in this verse is asking no questions and is not reflecting on the days of his life. Third, in the light of the second reason, it seems that v.20 is intended to provide a contrast to the person described in 1:13 and 3:10; therefore, the idea of “keep occupied” fits the context better.

14. Labor without Satisfaction (6:1 – 9)

OVERVIEW

The basic theme of this section, as in much of the book, is the lack of satisfaction humans receive from their work. Moreover, if there was anything in the preceding *carpediem* passage (5:18 – 20) that may have teasingly given a person hope, this passage cruelly snatches it away.

1 I have seen another evil under the sun, and it weighs heavily on men: 2 God gives a man wealth,
possessions and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, but God does not enable him to
enjoy them, and a stranger enjoys them instead. This is meaningless, a grievous evil.

3 A man may have a hundred children and live many years; yet no matter how long he lives, if he
cannot enjoy his prosperity and does not receive proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off
than he. 4It comes without meaning, it departs in darkness, and in darkness its name is shrouded.
5Though it never saw the sun or knew anything, it has more rest than does that man — 6even if he
lives a thousand years twice over but fails to enjoy his prosperity. Do not all go to the same place?

7 All man's efforts are for his mouth,
yet his appetite is never satisfied.

8 What advantage has a wise man
over a fool?
What does a poor man gain
by knowing how to conduct himself before others?

9 Better what the eye sees
than the roving of the appetite.
This too is meaningless,
a chasing after the wind.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Qohelet describes a burden that "weighs heavily" on humans and presumably on himself as well. God gives a person"wealth" (ʿōšer) ,"possessions" (nᵉkāsîm), and "honor" (kābôd) . The second member of this triad occurs only four other places in the OT (one being in Ecc 5:19). But significantly, two of those occurrences are in 2 Chronicles 1:11 – 12, and in both verses it occurs with the other two members of the triad, and in exactly the same order. In that passage God promises to give Solomon this triad of gifts as a reward for not having

requested them but instead having asked for wisdom.

Is this a purposeful allusion? And if so, does the frame-narrator intend for us to understand Qohelet here as being self-referential? There is no certain answer, but this much is certain: God has given an essentially useless gift. Wealth, possessions, and honor are worthless if God does not enable the recipient to enjoy them — God gives the cake but does not enable one to eat. To compound the absurdity, God gives these gifts to a stranger. It may be that the Solomonic allusion is intended to intensify the hopelessness. If these things brought Solomon no satisfaction, what hope is there for anyone else?It must be noticed as well that there is no characterization given for this stranger. He is neither wise nor foolish, neither good nor evil. What God does, at least in this passage according to Qohelet, he does arbitrarily.

3 – 6 An example is brought forward of a man who has a hundred children, long life, and prosperity, and yet for some reason is not able to enjoy them. Again, no ethical or other evaluative judgment is made. We could manufacture one, but it would lack support from the text.

One problem in v.3 is the reference to a proper burial. It seems a bit abrupt to introduce this idea, especially without giving the reason as to why, if it is to be understood with reference to the man.Literally the Hebrew reads, “there was no grave for him” (the word “proper” not appearing in the text).Along with Crenshaw, 126 – 27, and Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 48), it may be best to understand this clause as being anticipatory, referring to the stillborn, and to read *w'gam* as concessive (“and although”),resulting in the translation, “and though he had no burial, I say that the stillborn is better (off) than he”(for a similar sentiment see Job 3, esp. vv.11 – 19).

Another interpretive problem has to do with the referent for “it” in v.4. Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 243) has made an interesting case that the unfortunate man, not the stillborn child, is being described. He argues, for example, that the stillborn doesn’t really come and go, for it never actually comes. Also, its name is not covered in darkness, for it never had a name.

In addition to Fox’s arguments, if indeed the *w'gam*clause in v.3 is to be read as a concessive clause (Fox does not argue for this), then the same could be true for

the *w'gam* clause in v.5. Thus the following reading of vv.4 – 5 would result: "He [the man] comes in absurdity and he goes in darkness, and in darkness his name is covered. Even though he [the stillborn] never saw the sun or knew anything, there is more rest for this one [the stillborn] than for that one [the man]." Regardless of how one decides on these two translation issues, the basic idea is clear.The stillborn is better off than the man to whom, for whatever reason, God has given gifts without also giving the ability to enjoy them.

The example is raised another notch by supposing a scenario where this unfortunate man has a life that spans two millennia. In essence Qohelet says: fill in the blank with whatever number of years you wish — it still results in absurdity, since all go to the same place. The "place" may simply be the grave or, more likely, Sheol, a nebulous place where the dead go, and yet at the same time a place where, to use Qohelet's own language from 9:10 (where Qohelet actually uses the word), a place where "there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (for more, see Johnston, esp. 69 – 85).

7 – 9 In the previous verses, the complaint concerned the absurdity of a person's not being able to enjoy the fruit of his labor because God turns it over to someone else. In these verses, the absurdity has to do with those who apparently get to hold on to their possessions but still gain no satisfaction. Verse 7 should not be understood only as a reference to eating, but to the desire for, and the consumption of, material goods. The word "appetite" is *nepeš* , which is translated a number of ways by the various translations in its nearly eight hundred occurrences. In older translations it was usually rendered "soul." But because this gives rise to the misleading idea that the ancients thought the soul could be separated from the body, modern translations usually use the word "person" or "life." In this verse, however, it probably has a different meaning — "desire." In essence, our cravings to have and enjoy more things are never satisfied.

A tantalizing suggestion has been made that the two "his" pronouns in v.7 do not refer to the man but rather to the "place" previously mentioned in v.6, that is, Sheol (see Peter R. Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," *ASTI* 5 [1967]: 84 – 86; Mitchell J. Dahood, "Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography," *Bib* 49 [1968]: 368). Thus the suggestion is made that all human efforts are for Sheol, pictured — as in other places in the OT — as a beast with its mouth wide open to receive new inhabitants (see Ps 141:7; Pr 1:12; 27:20; 30:16; Isa 5:14; Hab 2:5). As

fascinating as this suggestion is, however, it doesn't quite seem to work in this context, especially since the same thought occurs in v.9 with definite reference to human desires.

In addition, Longman, 173, points out that Proverbs 16:26 provides a close parallel to the thought of v.7: "The laborer's appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on." And, as Seow, 226 – 27, has argued, it may well be that this Sheol imagery has actually contributed to the portrait of the greedy rich (cf. Ps 73:9; Hab 2:5) in such a way that the "insatiability of the rich is not only self-destructive, it poses dangers to others who fall prey to their greed."

While the first half of v.8 is clear, the meaning of the second half is not so easy to determine (though the Hebrew is not difficult), nor does either half at first sight seem particularly relevant to the immediate context. Most likely we are to understand that the "wise man" is the same as the person described in v.7. By his wisdom this person has amassed wealth, but since it brings him no satisfaction, he has no advantage over the fool. And as for the poor person, whether he is a fool or not, he might as well be one, for should he manage to gain enough wisdom to know how to get along in life, it really does him no good, for it "takes money" to put that knowledge into action.

The implications of this situation are then laid out in v.9. It is better to be content with what you have than to wear yourself out getting more. For the wise and wealthy this means: Be satisfied with your current possessions. For the poor, who may or may not be wise, it means: Be content with your possessions, don't try to learn any more about how to get along in society than you already know, and be content to stay in the same social class to which you currently belong — to rise any higher it takes money, and you don't have it. This may or may not be seen as good advice. But for Qohelet, the whole situation is oppressive — it is an absurdity.

C. Qohelet's Advice (6:10 – 12:7)

OVERVIEW

We turn now to the second major section of Qohelet's monologue. There is some overlap of content in that Qohelet still does some searching in this second half, while the first half has not been free of advice. But by and large this second part is more admonitory in character, more proverbial, and has more of a didactic tone than does the first part.

1. Impotence and Ignorance (6:10 – 12)

OVERVIEW

Scholars disagree over whether these three verses go more with what precedes or what follows, or whether it stands alone. Seow, 241, however, has demonstrated a close connection between these verses and the closing verses of the next section (7:1 – 14); what follows is adapted from Seow with slight changes:

6:10 - 12	7:10 - 14
“whatever happens” (6:10)	“how is it?” (7:10)
“they cannot” (6:10)	“who can” (7:13)
“advantage” (6:11)	“advantage” (7:12)
“like a shadow” (6:12)	“as a shadow” (7:12)
“after him” (6:12)	“after him” (7:14)

The correspondences support the idea that 6:10 – 7:14 should be seen as a coherently unified section, with 6:10 – 12 and 7:10 – 14 serving as an inclusio to bracket the entire passage. This bracketing also has the effect of relativizing the material that comes in between the two “brackets.” The middle section of this larger passage makes a number of declarations as to what is “good” or “better.” The two bracketing passages, while not necessarily nullifying the declarations, cast a huge shadow of suspicion over them.

10 Whatever exists has already been named,
and what man is has been known;
no man can contend
with one who is stronger than he.

11 The more the words,
the less the meaning,
and how does that profit anyone?

12 For who knows what is good for a man in life, during the few and meaningless days he passes through like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?

COMMENTARY

10 – 12 There is a translational problem in v.10 concerning the clause the NIV renders, “what man is has been known.” The Hebrew here is awkward, and there have been several suggestions for translation, including some that emend the text at various levels. The preferable option is to leave the text as is and to read, more literally, as follows: “Whatever has been has already had its name called, and it is known that it [i.e., the name] is Adam, and he is not able to contend with the one who is stronger than he.”

The verse calls attention to the creation where God created the first human pair and named them "*ʾādām*" (Ge 1:26 – 27; 5:2). It also calls to mind the ancient Near Eastern notion that to name something or someone was to demonstrate and exercise authority over what or who was named. As Qohelet uses the concept here, the point is that humankind has been named and its course has been determined, and there is no point in trying to change that course. It is futile for humans to argue with their creator, for he is stronger than they are, hence he is the one who will determine their course.

Verse 11, then, in contrast to being simply a general saying about the over-multiplication of words (though that extrapolation can still be made), is specifically about the attempt to argue with God about the course of one's life. There is no point in doing it. Indeed, the more you argue, the more you increase the absurdity (*hebel*) of the situation.There is no profit whatsoever for humans in the attempt.

Verse 12 reinforces how futile such an exercise would be. Not only is God stronger than humans; he also has an obvious advantage in the knowledge department. Humans have no comparable resources, and no one can — and God will not — tell them what their future will be. Instead of the understanding in the NIV, it is probably best to render ,*ʾaḥᵃrāyw* ("after him") as "his future." This would not be some future life after death; rather, it is specifically qualified as "under the sun." In other words, no one can discern what the rest of one's life on earth will be like, other than the fact that it will be absurd and will pass away like a shadow. Consequently, there is little point in wasting those few, shadowy days debating about them with one who is stronger and omniscient and has obviously made up his mind about how those days will run their course. Cut your losses now and abandon the task.

NOTE

10 וְנוֹדַע אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אָדָם (*wᵉnôdāʿ ʾᵃšer-hûʾ ʾādām*), literally, "and it is known what he man," seems at first to be awkwardly unintelligible Hebrew. In the exposition above I have suggested a reading that takes the pronoun הוּא (*hûʾ*) to refer to "name" rather than "man." Additionally, Gordis, 263, notes that after verbs of perception אֲשֶׁר (*ʾᵃšer*)

never means “what” but instead “that”; however, he rejects the possible translation, “it is known that he is man,” because there is “no logical and grammatical antecedent for אָדָם (ʾādām). But “name” would seem to work well as the antecedent. The use of “name” to label “what has happened” is a subtle shift away from “happenings” to “humans” and allows Qohelet to make a statement about אָדָם (ʾādām).

Another attractive suggestion has been put forward by Seow, 230 – 32, that revocalizes אֲשֶׁר־הוּא as אֲשֻׁרֵהוּ (ʾᵃšurēhû, dropping the א as a dittography from the next word). This would be אֲשׁוּר (ʾāšûr), “course,” with a third person masculine singular suffix, resulting in the translation, “his course is known.”

The suffixed pronoun in this case would be anticipatory for אָדָם (ʾādām), “man,” resulting in “his course is known, that is, humankind’s.” With either suggested translation, it is important to note that “known”in this verse does not refer to simple cognition but should rather be seen as in parallel with “named” or “called” to indicate divine determination.

2. When Things Are All Twisted (7:1 – 14)

OVERVIEW

After having just said that it is impossible to know what is good (6:12), Qohelet now proceeds, nevertheless, to pontificate what is good. Is he being sarcastic? Are his suggestions as to what is good, or what things are better than other things, intended primarily for shock value? Or do the following verses simply serve to illustrate his original point?Whatever the case may be, at the end of the passage (vv.13 – 14) he will again reanchor all his suggestions firmly in pessimism and ignorance.

1 A good name is better than fine perfume,
and the day of death better than the day of birth.

2 It is better to go to a house of mourning
than to go to a house of feasting,
for death is the destiny of every man;

the living should take this to heart.

3 Sorrow is better than laughter,
because a sad face is good for the heart.

4 The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning,
but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure.

5 It is better to heed a wise man’s rebuke
than to listen to the song of fools.

6 Like the crackling of thorns under the pot,
so is the laughter of fools.
This too is meaningless.

7 Extortion turns a wise man into a fool,
and a bribe corrupts the heart.

8 The end of a matter is better than its beginning,
and patience is better than pride.

9 Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,
for anger resides in the lap of fools.

10 Do not say, “Why were the old days better than these?”
For it is not wise to ask such questions.

11 Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing
and benefits those who see the sun.

12 Wisdom is a shelter
as money is a shelter,
but the advantage of knowledge is this:
that wisdom preserves the life of its possessor.

13 Consider what God has done:
Who can straighten
what he has made crooked?

14 When times are good, be happy;
but when times are bad, consider:
God has made the one
as well as the other.
Therefore, a man cannot discover
anything about his future.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet creates or quotes a proverb with which all would agree, even though they might not necessarily reflect their agreement by their actions.The proverb is even nicely packaged with a chiastic and alliterative flair, the first line in Hebrew being *ṭôb šēm miššemen ṭôb*, literally, “good name than oil good” (“oil” and “name” also being associated in SS 1:3). But this proverb leaves the reader unprepared for the comparative statement that the day of death is better than the day of birth, and now the reader has to figure out how the comparison works.

James Kugel (*The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ.Press, 1981], 10) suggests that the verse anticipates Qohelet’s later statement in 10:1 that perfume can become easily spoiled, so that the newborn has the potential of turning out to be good or bad, even as good oil can become spoiled. But if one has a good reputation, on the day of one’s death that reputation is secured. Kugel’s interpretation is most likely correct. But taking into account Qohelet’s assertion that no one is really ever remembered (1:11; cf.9:15), we see how fragile the declaration as to what is better really is.

Later, in one of the so-called *carpe diem* passages (9:7 – 10), Qohelet will recommend the liberal use of perfume during one’s life in the light of the absurdity of death. He doesn’t seem to be concerned about a good name in that passage or elsewhere in the book. Also note that birth and death are the first two elements in the “pretty poem about time”in 3:2. Certainly, anyone reading the poem would have considered birth to be the positive element in that pair, with death being the negative one. Here positive and negative are reversed. Perhaps this is his sarcastically subtle way of reinforcing the implied answer, “no one,” to his question in 6:12, “Who knows what is good?”

2 – 4 In the next three verses, it only follows (as Lohfink, 93, aptly puts it, “the pretty saying is dragged on *ad absurdum*”) that the house of mourning is a better place to be than a house of feasting. The former probably refers to a home where a death has occurred, and the latter, the *bêt mišteh* (“house of drinking”), to any place where there was a celebration. (The exact phrase occurs elsewhere only in Est 7:8; Jer 16:8.) The reason given is that at a funeral a person is reminded of a human being’s ultimate “end” (*sôp*; the NIV ’s “destiny,”while acceptable, being perhaps a bit too nuanced).By attendance at the house of mourning, one gains a proper perspective on life and death. The sentiment here may be related to that expressed in Psalm 90:12,“Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Qohelet goes on to say that “anger” or “frustration” is better than laughter (“sorrow” is too weak a translation for *kaʿas*; see 1:18; 2:23; 7:9; 11:10) and that a “sad face” (lit., “evil of face”) makes the heart better (cf. here Pr 14:13). Finally, Qohelet remarks that wise people attend mournful activities, but fools go to the “house of pleasure” (*bêt śimḥâ*).

It should be noted again how the so-called *carpe diem* passages are relativized by this advice as to what is better. Elsewhere, Qohelet commends *śimḥâ* (“joy”; cf. 2:26; 5:20; 8:15; 9:17). Especially in 8:15 (“So I commended the *enjoyment* [*śimḥâ*] of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and drink . . .”) and 9:7 (“Go eat your food with *gladness* [*śimḥâ*] , and drink your wine with a joyful heart”), Qohelet recommends behavior that here in ch. 7 he calls foolish. Neither here nor in the “eat, drink, and be merry” passages are we given reliable advice as to what is good;rather, we are given a demonstration that Qohelet is more on target when he says that neither he nor anyone else really knows what is good (6:12).

5 – 7 In these verses some traditional wisdom is dispensed but then subverted. The value of a rebuke coming from one who is wise versus anything that a fool might have to offer is commonplace in biblical wisdom (see, e.g., Pr 10:10; 13:20; 14:3, 7; 15:2, 7;17:10; 27:5; 28:23). While the contrast between the wise and the foolish in v.5 is precise, that between “rebuke” and “song” is not. This has led some commentators (e.g., Seow, 236) to suggest that the song must be, in particular, an ode or song of praise (f lattery?). Qohelet’s oppositions are not always that exact, however (see comments on 3:1 – 8), and the contrast here has more to do with seriousness and soberness than inanity and silliness.

This is depicted graphically in the illustration of the “crackling of thorns under the pot.” The words for “thorns” (*sîrîm*), “pot” (*sîr*), and “fool” (*kĕsîl*) all have the syllable *sî*, thus giving the verse a measure of alliteration and assonance. (As well, “laughter”[*śĕḥōq*] begins with an “s” sound; in v.5 the word for “song” [*šîr*] may also be part of the scheme.)

Crenshaw, 135, nicely summarizes the thought: “This wordplay gives an apt description of the spontaneous bursts of laughter among fools, where there is more noise than substance. Thistles provide quick flames, little heat, and a lot of unpleasant noise.” Qohelet considers this to be absurd.

The meaning of v.7, in the context, is debated. In contrast to the NIV, which ignores the *kî* at the beginning of v.7 and turns the verse into a stand-alone statement, the NASB at least correctly attempts to translate it with “for.” Other translations, such as the NRSV, render it as “surely” or “indeed.” There are two problems with understanding the sense of the verse. The first is that the *kî* (“for”) suggests some connection between it and what precedes it, but that connection is not so easily discernible. Second, in the Qumran fragment of this passage (4QQoha) there is an erasure before v.7 that covers, according to some estimates, about fifteen to twenty character spaces. This has led several commentators to suggest that there has been an omission from the text that would more clearly explain the connection between vv.5 – 6 and v.7.

Even before the Qumran discovery, commentators had suggested that something had been lost in the process of transmission. The erasure in the scroll, however, occurs at the very top of a column and may simply be an erasure of mistakenly duplicated text. There is no other textual evidence that supports the possibility of a deletion. Long-man, 186, has suggested that the connection is that v.7 explains why the advice given in vv.5 – 6 is to be seen as *hebel* (“meaningless”), as it is called at the end of v.6. The reason is that you cannot be sure whether the rebuke of the wise man might be the result of extortion or bribery.

Interestingly, biblical Wisdom literature is ambivalent on the subject of bribery (see Pr 15:27; 17:8, 23; 18:16; 19:6; 21:14; 22:16; 29:4). Fools are always fools, but the wise can become fools, and a bit of extortion or a bribe

may be all that is needed to effect the change. How then can you have confidence in their advice and in their rebukes? So Qohelet calls it an absurdity.

8 – 9 These two verses seem to be only loosely related to their immediate context, though there is a bit of connection to vv.1 – 2, which are concerned with the end of life rather than its beginning. The advice is fairly traditional in Wisdom literature.The end is better than the beginning, and patience wins out over pride. A passage that also seems to connect these two ideas is 1 Kings 20:11, where to the proud taunts of the king of Aram the Israelite king Ahab responds,“One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.”Indeed, for Ahab the end of the battle turned out much better than the beginning.

The word for “anger” in v.9 is *ka‹as,* the same word translated “sorrow,” “frustration,” or “vexation” in v.3. Most likely, the word does, in fact, have two different meanings or nuances in the respective contexts. But in the larger context of vv.1 – 14, which purports to pontificate what is good, the many twists and turns the passage takes, even with respect to the same word’s being used in different senses, betrays a certain confusion on Qohelet’s part. His pontifications, as a result, are measurably weakened; nevertheless, there is certainly truth in the sentiment. When anger looks for a lap in which to nestle, it usually seeks out a fool’s lap first.

10 This verse appears to stand alone. But it still ties in to the overall theme of the good or better thing to do. Murphy (*Ecclesiastes*, 65), in suggesting that this statement in some way constitutes a critique of traditional wisdom with its desire to preserve the traditions of the past, probably goes too far. At the same time, it could be argued that there is a latent danger that one could all too easily end up glorifying the past by selective memory. As Longman, 198, notes, “to believe that the present is worse than the past shows a complete ignorance of history.” Furthermore, Crenshaw, 137, calling attention to what Qohelet had said earlier in 1:10, remarks,“If there is nothing new under the sun, the past is not superior to the present.”

11 – 12 Now Qohelet introduces what probably a majority of scholars believe to be a comparison between wisdom and money. What is more likely, however, is that what is introduced is not a comparison but an association. The difference

between the two ideas can be seen in the translations of the NIV and NASB: NIV, “like an inheritance”; NASB, “along with an inheritance.” Prepositions are perhaps the slipperiest things in any language, and in v.11 it is the preposition עִם over which the translations and commentaries differ. Advocates of using “as, like” to translate עִם point to 2:16, where the same preposition means “as.” But even there I believe that “along with” provides a perfectly acceptable rendering (lit., “how dies the wise man along with the fool”); it even adds a nuance that is missing in the translation “as.”

In other words, in 7:11, the point is not that wisdom is as good as an inheritance, but that it is good when coupled with an inheritance. It takes money to put wisdom to use. The statement recalls 6:8, where Qohelet, in essence, considered it useless for a poor person to be wise (cf. 9:16). The thought here, then, is that you have to have money to use your wisdom. And how much better it is when that money is an inheritance; as Fox remarks (*Time to Tear Down*, 256), “This is an especially desirable form of wealth because one supposedly obtains it without strain and toil.” Indeed, as Longman, 190, also notes, this is “a rather jaundiced view of wisdom.”

There is also debate on the interpretation of v.12. Literally the Hebrew for the first half of the verse is, “for in the shadow of wisdom in the shadow of silver.” Several of the ancient versions read the prepositions on either just the last occurrence or on both occurrences of the word “shadow” as כְּ (“as”) rather than the MT’s בְּ (“in”). As to how to understand the verse, the plethora of suggestions ranges from reading the prepositions as the ancient versions understood them to a number of conjectural emendations, some of which take the phrase “in the shadow” and turn it into verbal form. (For a survey see James Kugel, “Qohelet and Money,”*CBQ* 51 [1989]: 40 – 44.) Probably the simplest solution is to leave the text as is and understand it, as commentators such as Crenshaw, Fox, Longman do but against both the NIV and NASB, to mean that to be in the shadow of wisdom is to also be in the shadow of money.

The verse then goes on to say that wisdom has an advantage over money in that the owner of wisdom has a better chance of living longer. There is, however, an intended irony in the verse: long life is supposed to be the result of one’s being in wisdom’s “shadow”; yet, the word “shadow” had just been used in 6:12 to denote the shortness of life.Wisdom may provide a longer life; it may not. And the “may not” is, for Qohelet, an absurdity.

13 – 14 This section comes to a close by calling attention to the works of God. But Qohelet, far from praising God, attributes to him the messiness of vv.1 – 12. Qohelet may be correct that the day of death is better than the day of birth. Perhaps it is better to go to a house of mourning than to the house of feasting. Perhaps vexation and sadness are better than laughter. Perhaps it is true that wise men can turn into fools. Perhaps it is true that wisdom and money provide protection that are only shadowlike in substance. But these things can only be true in a world that is twisted and warped — and here Qohelet clearly charges God with the twisting.

Qohelet has gotten bolder as he has gone along.In 1:15 he declared, “what is twisted cannot be straightened.” He seems to hint that God arbitrarily plays favorites as to whom he decides to give his gifts (2:26). Plucking up courage, he begins to suggest that God has not done right by the world in allowing injustice to prevail, and that his purpose in doing so was to humble humans into the realization that they are like animals (3:16 – 21). In ch. 5 there is the subtle hint that God is in some way behind the oppression that goes on in the world. In ch. 6 God perpetrates an evil on humanity in his bestowal and withholding of gifts, and since God is the sole determiner, there is no point in arguing with him. Now, in his boldest move yet, the twisting that he complained about in 1:15 he charges directly to God. The world is twisted all right, and God is the one who has done the twisting!

Bildad, using the same word as Qohelet does in 1:15 and 7:13 (ʿāwat), asks rhetorically in Job 8:3, “Does God *pervert* justice? Does the Almighty *pervert* what is right?” It is only later in the book that Job uses the same word to provide his answer: “then know that God has *wronged* me” (19:6). Later, Elihu takes it upon himself to declare outright that “it is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would *pervert* justice” (34:12). Here Qohelet takes Job’s side and says that it is entirely conceivable.

So what are humans to do while they live in this twisted, meaningless, absurd world? If God gives you a good day, consider yourself fortunate and enjoy it. If he gives you a bad one, then you will have to do some reflecting on these days, unlike the supposedly fortunate person in 5:20, who never has to reflect. You will have to consider that both days come from God and that there is no way you

will be able to ascertain which one of those days you are going to have tomorrow or the next day or any day after that.

And there is little, if anything, you can do to affect God's decisions in this regard. Righ teous-ness on your part may get you a good day; wickedness may get you a bad day. There's no way to tell for sure, because from our vantage point the decisions appear to be arbitrary. "Keeping fortunes fluctuating inexplicably is God's way of keeping man uncertain and anxious and crumbling his self-confidence. This is one way God causes fear" (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 255). "To the bewilderment of all, God's sovereign will is behind good and evil, and thus human beings are kept off balance" (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 63). Qohelet's advice never rises much higher.

NOTES

7 עֹשֶׁק (*ʿōšeq*), "extortion," is translated by the NASB as "oppression."This is the more usual meaning of the word and is so understood in 5:8 and in its verbal form in 4:1. By metonymy, however, the word can stand for the result of such oppression, i.e., extorted goods (as in Lev 6:4; Ps 62:10; Eze 22:12, 29).

For more on what is either a lacuna or an erasure in 4QQoh^{a}, see James Muilenberg, "A Qohelet Scroll from Qumran," *BASOR* 135 (1954): 26 – 27; Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 621.

14 Though the exact phrase does not occur elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, the translation "on account of which" for עַל־דִּבְרַת שֶׁ (*ʿal-dibrat šeʾ*; NIV, "therefore") is clear from the parallel construction in Aramaic in Daniel 2:30: עַל־דִּבְרַת דִּי (*ʿal-dibrat dî*).

Charles Whitley (*Koheleth: His Language and Thought* [BZAW 148; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979], 66) has argued that the clause יִמְצָא ... אַחֲרָיו (*yimṣāʾ ... ʾaḥărāyw*, "discover . . . his future") has an equivalent in Aramaic that means "find fault with." Murphy (*Ecclesiastes* , 60 – 61, 66) has also opted for this translation.It has little to commend it, however, and most translations and commentators keep to the traditional rendering. Also, in accordance with our explanation of 6:12,

אַחֲרָיו most likely refers to one's future on earth, not to an afterlife.

3. A Balanced, Mediocre Life (7:15 – 22)

15 In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:

a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.

16 Do not be over righteous,
neither be overwise —
why destroy yourself?

17 Do not be overwicked,
and do not be a fool —
why die before your time?

18 It is good to grasp the one
and not let go of the other.
The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.

19 Wisdom makes one wise man more powerful
than ten rulers in a city.

20 There is not a righteous man on earth
who does what is right and never sins.

21 Do not pay attention to every word people say,
or you may hear your servant cursing you —

22 for you know in your heart
that many times you yourself have cursed others.

COMMENTARY

15 In vv.15 – 22 Qohelet gives some questionable, "lukewarm" advice with

regard to righteousness and wickedness, wisdom and folly. He begins by reporting on what he has seen in his "meaningless life" (*bîmê hebli*, , lit., "in my absurd days").Some commentators claim that here *hebel* clearly refers to the "ephemerality" of life, the fewness of one's fleeting days, not to their meaninglessness or absurdity. They probably do so because of the temporal reference; but here, as almost everywhere else in the book, the idea of absurdity best fits the context. How short Qohelet's life has been is irrelevant in the context of what he is reporting. What he sees makes his life absurd, and here he sees the wicked living long lives and the righteous dying, apparently, after a relatively short life. Though traditional wisdom certainly recognized these anomalies, for Qohelet they are oppressive.

16 – 18 These three verses constitute a conundrum of interpretation. In v.16 Qohelet counsels against excessive righteousness and wisdom; in v.17 the advice is to avoid excessive wickedness and folly.The result of the first pair is emotional and psychological devastation (the real meaning of *šāmam*, instead of "ruin, destroy"), a life not worth living.The result of the second pair is death before one's time. (It seems that humans sometimes can help God with his ordering of the appointed times!)

The problem comes in trying to understand the exact meaning of the advice. On the one hand, Qohelet appears to recommend that one should not "strive for excellence" in the areas of ethics and wisdom; on the other hand, he seems to condone a measure of wickedness, in that one should not be "overly" wicked. Only "folly" is left unqualified, without an attendant intensifier.

Various suggestions have been made to account for the advice. One is to understand the particular form of the verb "to be wise" in v.16 (called a Hithpael) as meaning, "Don't make a pretense of being wise." While this is grammatically possible, it is unlikely. Qohelet never uses the Hithpael verbal form anywhere else in Ecclesiastes to indicate this nuance (as noted by M. Strange, "The Question of Moderation in Ecclesiastes 7:15 – 18" [D.Sac.Th. diss., Catholic Univ. of America, 1969], 80; cited in Long-man, 195). The only other OT occurrence of the Hithpael for the verb "to be wise" (*ḥākam*; Ex 1:10) does not indicate pretense (as noted by Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 261). Furthermore, none of the other verbs in these two verses are in the Hithpael, nor is there any indication that pretense is meant for them.

The advice is not to avoid pretense in righteousness and wisdom, but to not overdo it. The reasoning seems to be, following on the heels of v.15, that since righteousness doesn't necessarily guarantee long life, there's no point in overdoing it and setting yourself up for a huge disappointment. The same thing goes for wisdom, which only makes you more acutely aware of life's absurdities when they occur. In v.17, perhaps a little mischievousness can be a good thing, but don't overdo it, for you might hasten your death. (But then again, you might live a long time, as do the wicked in v.15.)

In v.18, the advice is to hold on to the one and not let go of the other. The NASB's "come forth with both of them" is preferable to the NIV 's over-interpretive "avoid all extremes." The one who fears God will exercise both. But to what does "both"refer? One possibility is that it refers to the two pairs of polar opposites: righteousness and wickedness, and wisdom and folly (though "folly," being the only one of the three without an intensifying qualifier, is not an option). Another is that it refers to the two pieces of advice given in the preceding verses. Probably the latter is meant, though it doesn't make too much difference which option is chosen.

My conclusion here is that Qohelet simply gives bad advice. Motivated by v.15 that the righteous die young and the wicked live long, Qohelet advises against committing oneself totally to either of the two options. The one who is afraid of what God can do, as evidenced by what he has already done in v.15, will go forth in life accompanied by Qohelet's two axioms. Sometimes he will employ the one, sometimes the other, and maybe both at the same time — whatever it takes to stay on God's good side.A balanced, mediocre, boring but safe life.

19 This verse seems clear enough, but its relationship to the context is less so. Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 249, 256 – 57) opts for relocating the verse to just after v.12. He also argues for an emendation that reads the last half of the verse as, "more than the wealth of the magnates who are in a city," by repointing the Hebrew word for "ten" and making a slight change in the division of the consonants (see Notes for details). Fox calls attention to the "widespread" dislocations that occur in Wisdom literature and also argues that the verse makes better sense coming after v.12 (with or without the emendation). In its present location it makes no sense and "interrupts the tight connection between vv.18 and 20." Fox's arguments are cogent and most likely correct. But with either

translation and either location, wisdom's value still ends up being undermined by the larger context of the chapter.

20 Perhaps connecting more closely to vv.15 – 18 than v.19 — or perhaps serving to relativize v.19 — this present verse, while true in its acknowledgment that there is no one who never sins (see 1Ki 8:46; Ps 143:2; Pr 20:9), seems trite. Is Qohelet perhaps using this truism as an excuse for his less-than-commendable advice not to strive for righteousness?

21 – 22 Probably serving as a concrete illustration of Qohelet's statement in v.20, these verses advise against taking too much to heart the negative things people say about you, for you yourself have said the same things about others. Verse 22 is slightly ambiguous. Literally it says, "for also many times, your heart knows that you have cursed others." The ambiguity is as to whether the cursing of others has actually been done verbally. Perhaps it was only done internally, and that is why Qohelet says, "your heart knows." In either case, the verses call appropriate attention to the all-too-hasty reaction of condemning others for things you have done yourself, or toward which you have a tendency but perhaps lack occasion. Good advice — but set in a context where the advice has not been so stellar.

NOTES

15 Here, as in 2:14, 16; 3:19 – 20; 7:18, the word "all" כֹּל (*kōl*) refers to only two things; hence the NIV's translation "both" in some of these passages.

One expects something like "days" after מַאֲרִיךְ (*maʾărîk*, "lengthen"), according to the usual Hebrew idiom for living a long time, "to lengthen one's days." While it is possible that the "days" has dropped out, it is just as likely that the idiom was so common that the verb could stand in for the whole phrase.

18 If the אֵת (*ʾēt*) is understood as the preposition "with" rather than the direct object marker, there is no real difficulty with the grammar; the resulting translation, as in the NASB, is "*with* both of them."

19 As mentioned above, Fox favors in place of the MT's מֵעֲשָׂרָה שַׁלִּיטִים (*mēʿăśārâ šallîṭîm*, ten magistrates"), reading מֵעֹשֶׁר הַשַּׁלִּיטִים (*mēʿōšer haššallîṭîm*, the wealth of the magistrates," or "magnates"). This is a reasonable emendation and probably correct.

תָּעֹז (*tāʿōz*, , "to be strong") is probably to be read intransitively, i.e., "wisdom is more powerful for a wise man."The LXX gives evidence of, and 4QQoh[a] actually has a different verb, אָזַר (*ʾāzar*, to help"). Either one is possible; the meaning is not greatly affected.

4. Of Schemes and Schemers: The Knowledge of Good and Evil (7:23 – 29)

OVERVIEW

As he already had at the beginning of his biography (1:12 – 2:26), Qohelet declares his determination to use his wisdom to investigate different matters, wisdom among them. The results of the investigation turn out to be no more satisfactory than they were before.

23 All this I tested by wisdom and I said, "
I am determined to be wise"—
but this was beyond me.

24 Whatever wisdom may be,
it is far off and most profound —
who can discover it?

25 So I turned my mind to understand,
to investigate and to search out wisdom and the scheme of things
and to understand the stupidity of wickedness
and the madness of folly.

26 I find more bitter than death
the woman who is a snare,whose heart is a trap
and whose hands are chains.
The man who pleases God will escape her,

but the sinner she will ensnare.

27 "Look," says the Teacher,"this is what I have discovered:

"Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things —28

28 while I was still searching
but not finding —
I found one upright man among a thousand,
but not one upright woman among them all.

29 This only have I found:
God made mankind upright,
but men have gone in search of many schemes."

COMMENTARY

23 – 25 By wisdom Qohelet determines to be wise, yet he finds wisdom to be beyond him — it is "far off, most profound" (lit., "deeply deep").There is no real contradiction here in Qohelet's claim that by wisdom he sought wisdom, as some have supposed. Nor is there any need to try to postulate different definitions or fine nuances between the wisdom he possessed and the wisdom he sought. As Longman, 200, notes, to attempt to do so "presses 's consistency too far, forgetting that at times Qohelet's words are almost stream of consciousness. It is as if he states his wisdom program, catches himself, and then admits his failings."

The real conclusion to be drawn from Qohelet's resolve to find wisdom by wisdom, yet not finding it, is that wisdom — especially the form that tries to limit the finding of it to what can be concluded from observation — doesn't work. It tries to make humanity's investigatory endeavors the "measure of all things," thus cutting wisdom off from its true source, indeed, the very beginning of wisdom — the proper reverential fear of God and trust in his revelation.

Introduced for the first time in the book in v.25 is the word *ḥešbôn* (GK 3113; NIV, "scheme of things"). It reappears in v.27 (also in 9:10), and a similar-

sounding word with the same consonants but different vowels occurs in v.29. This sets up a wordplay here. In v.25 *ḥešbôn* seems to be either parallel to or, perhaps better, an explanatory term for wisdom. As a probable derivative of the verb *ḥāšab* (GK 3108), which means to “think, consider, reckon, design,” the word “encompasses the intricate plans, schemes, and inventions produced by human thought and ingenuity” (John Hartley, “חשׁב,” *NIDOTTE,* 2:308 – 9).

While it is a harmless enough word, in this verse it perhaps sets up the next line forebodingly — what Qohelet wants to know is “the stupidity of wickedness and the madness of folly” (the first phrase being, more literally, “the wickedness of stupidity”). He wants to investigate not only the good but also the bad, i.e.,the dark side. The reader, aware of how the book has already alluded to the early chapters of Genesis, will perhaps be reminded of someone else who wanted the knowledge of good and evil in order to be wise (Ge 2:17; 3:5 – 6). The prospects are not promising.

26 The investigation of the dark side leads Qohelet to make a pronouncement either about a certain type of woman or about women in general.Given what follows in v.28, it would seem that even if he is not referring to women in general, he certainly thinks that a large majority of females are in fact described by the sinister terms he uses. Even though his description of the woman in v.26 is reminiscent of the description of the adulteress in Proverbs 2:16 – 18; 5:3 – 6; 6:24 – 29; 7:6 – 27, Qohelet, surprisingly, does not identify the woman here as an adulteress.This again lends force to the argument that he is describing women in general. His conclusion, then, is that women are the problem.

Fox (*Time to Tear Down* , 268) captures well how surprising this conclusion is: “The result of his inquiries in the abstruse realms of intellect comes down to this: woman is dangerous [!].” As surprising as this may be (if indeed Ge 3 underlies the author’s thinking in this passage), the statement may reflect Adam’s answer in the garden of Eden when asked by God whether he had eaten from the forbidden tree:“The woman you put here with me — she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Ge 3:12).Adam blames the woman. The frame-narrator, the creator of the composite Qohelet character, has made his creation talk just like Adam!

27 – 29 The narrator intrudes just briefly here in v.27 to remind the reader that

Qohelet is the one who is saying these things. It is almost as though he wants to distance himself from the character he has created (though the distance in his day would not be as great as in our own).

All translations add a verb to their renderings in order to make better sense of the last line in v.27.Taking their cue from the phrase “one to one” (ʾaḥat lᵉʾaḥat), most have incorporated the verb “to add”; several have also translated this second occurrence of the word ḥešbôn (NIV , “scheme of things”) as “sum,” which is indeed a possible translation. It seems better, however, to leave room for other possibilities. Gordis, 180, 284, for example, translates ,(ʾaḥat lᵉʾaḥat), as “step by step.” It is also possible that a more accurate understanding is that Qohelet “compared” one thing to another. Or perhaps he examined “people” one by one, which would then provide an antecedent for “them all” in v.28.

Qohelet, conceding that he has not been able to find the ultimate explanation, says that he nevertheless found at least this much — one man in a thousand, but not one woman. We are not told in this verse, however, what criterion he has used. What would a man or woman have either to be or do in order for Qohelet to count him or her? The NIV supplies the term “upright,” incorporating it from v.29. In light of the moral implications that are present in the woman’s description in v.26, as well as the use of the term “upright” in v.29, it seems that this suggestion is correct. Righteous men are rare; righteous women do not exist.

Despite his portrayal of woman in v.26 and his failure to find one worth trusting in v.28, later (in 9:9) Qohelet will still recommend that it is apparently worth the risk to love one of them and to attempt to enjoy life with her. This suggests that his depictions of woman in these verses have been somewhat hyperbolic. Nevertheless, despite the valiant efforts of some commentators, it is impossible to clear Qohelet of all misogynist charges. His words, as much as any others in the Bible, show the results of the curse in Genesis 3:16 and the strife between men and women.

Fearing that perhaps he had gone too far with his charge in 7:13 that God has twisted and made the world the way it is, and having carried his blaming of women about as far as it can go, Qohelet returns to a more orthodox sentiment in v.29, which again shows the influence of the early chapters of Genesis. He affirms that God made humans “upright” (yāšār) but that they have searched instead

for many “schemes.”

The word for “schemes” is *ḥiššᵉbōnôt* (GK 3115), which is related to the different word *he.šbôn* in vv.25, 27 but which is also translated by the NIV as “schemes.” This word is used only twice in the OT — here and in Chronicles 26:15, where it apparently refers to military equipment. In the Ecclesiastes context, it must refer to something in contrast to “upright.” The similarity of this rare word to the rare one used to describe that for which Qohelet searched in vv.25, 27 practically demands that the reader see a wordplay here; thus the title that I gave to this section: “Schemes and Schemers.” If humans, despite having been made upright, have gone off in search of schemes and have in fact become schemers, then Qohelet himself, having done this very thing by his search for a *ḥešbôn* — a search that even took him to the dark side in his search for wisdom — has become the premier example of a schemer. Qohe-let has indicted himself.

NOTES

25 The last four words have caused some difficulty. The overall meaning is clear enough, but the syntax is a bit odd. The phrase רֶשַׁע כְּסֶל (*rešaʿ kᵉsel* “wickedness of stupidity”) appears to be a construct chain, but the nouns could also both be read as absolute. The latter phrase, וְהַסְּכְלוּת הוֹלֵלוֹת. (*wᵉhassiklût hôlēlôt*) can also be seen as construct chain, but it is odd to have the article on the construct noun and the construct noun as the only one of the four with the article. Some commentators, such as Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 268), have opted simply to read the four nouns as independent of each other. Again, the meaning is not significantly affected.

27 The MT has אָמְרָה קֹהֶלֶת (*ʾāmrâ qōhelet*) with a third person feminine singular verb. But most commentators recognize an incorrect word division here.The ה (*h*) on the verb should be attached to the noun instead, resulting in a third person masculine singular verb.

28 Attempts either to downplay or relativize the apparently misogynistic character of this verse have included: understanding אֶלֶף (*ʾelep*) to be “army” rather than “thousand,” thus resulting in a simple statement that Qohelet found no women in the army (Klaus Baltzer,“Women and War in Qohelet 7:23 – 8:1a,”*HTR* 80 [1987]: 127 – 32); suggesting that Qohelet is quoting a statement

with which he does not actually agree (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 77; in a slightly different form Perry, 126); and understanding the statement to be a secondary addition to the text (Seow, 265). None of these proposals seem necessary or credible.

5. Fools in the King's Presence (8:1 – 9)

OVERVIEW

The similarity of the title I have given this passage to the one for 5:1 – 7 ("Fools in God's Presence") calls attention to the close parallels between the two passages. In 5:1 – 7, Qohelet gives advice as to how to avoid behaving and looking like a fool in God's presence. Here he does the same thing for those who have occasion to come before the king.That the author intends for the passages to be interpreted in relation to each other can be seen from the parallels between them. First there are parallels that are both conceptual and linguistic (to highlight the correspondences, I am using my own translation rather than the NIV):

"guard [*šāmôr*] your foot when you go to the house of God" (5:1)	"guard [*šāmôr*] the mouth [the command-ment] of the king" (8:2); "whoever guards [*šōmēr*] the commandment [of the king]" (8:5)
"when you go [*yēlēk*] to the house of God" (5:1)	"go [*tēlēk*] from his [the king's] presence" (8:3)
"do not be rash [or 'hurry,' *tʿbahēl*]" (5:1)	"do not be rash [or 'hurry,' *tibbāhēl*]" (8:3)
"fools who do not acknowledge their evil [*rāʿ*]" (5:1)	"do not stand in an evil [*rāʿ*] thing" (8:3; the word also occurs in vv.5–6, 9)

Other conceptual parallels with 5:1 – 7 do not have precise verbal connections. In 5:4 – 6, Qohelet reminds the reader to be sure to keep vows made to God; in 8:2 he offers advice concerning an "oath of God" (though the exact nature of this oath is unclear;see below). In 5:3 God is sovereign in heaven, and in v.7 one must stand in awe of him; in 8:3 – 4 the king does whatever he pleases, his word is supreme, and no one can challenge him. In 5:6 God will be angry at those who fail to keep his command and will destroy their work. In 8:5 those who keep the king's command come to no harm — implication:those who fail to keep his command will certainly come to harm. (The king may also be the one who causes harm in 8:9.)

These parallels, as much as they may be a commentary on how one should reverence the king (i.e., as they would God), serve perhaps more sharply as a commentary on the attitude one should adopt with reference to God, i.e., the same attitude one would have toward an ancient Near Eastern despot. One gets the feeling in ch. 8 that there is no real heartfelt reverence, and certainly nothing approaching love, for the king. The obedience does not come out of reverence or devotion but instead out of fear. The same is true with regard to God in ch. 5.

This highlights again how wrong it is to suggest that Qohelet should be our guide in theological matters. While he is orthodox to a measure, ultimately his advice takes us down a dead-end street. He is not to be considered, as it were, a pre-NT apologist for the Chris tian faith, or for that matter the faith of the OT; rather, he represents in this book the very thing against which the prophets preached and against which Christ and the apostles warned — a syncretistic fusion of skeptical, pessimistic wisdom philosophy derived from empirical investigation, with a faith that is only minimally orthodox, lifeless, and colorless, without any real devotion. It is true that his description of life is in large measure accurate and that his questions are the correct ones. But we will have to look to someone other than him for the answers.

1 Who is like the wise man?
Who knows the explanation of things?
Wisdom brightens a man's face
and changes its hard appearance.

2 Obey the king's command, I say, because you took an oath before God. 3 Do not be in a hurry to leave the king's presence. Do not stand up for a bad cause, for he will do whatever he pleases. 4 Since a king's word is supreme, who can say to him,"What are you doing?"

5 Whoever obeys his command will come to no harm,
and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure.

6 For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter,
though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

7 Since no man knows the future,
who can tell him what is to come?

8 No man has power over the wind to contain it;
so no one has power over the day of his death.
As no one is discharged in time of war,
so wickedness will not release those who practice it.

9 All this I saw, as I applied my mind to everything done under the sun. There is a time when a man lords it over others to his own hurt.

COMMENTARY

1 It is difficult to decide whether this verse should be seen as closing the previous passage or beginning the current one. Perhaps it is best seen, with Longman, 208, "as a sarcastic exclamation of frustration that stands between two larger units."According to the suggestion of a number of commentators, based on a minor redivision of the consonants, the beginning of the first line should read, "Who is so wise?" This has much to commend it and, in the context, seems to be more likely (see Notes). On this reading, no one is really wise.

Nevertheless, in anticipation of the advice he will give in the next few verses, Qohelet suggests that someone who wants to be wise in the king's presence must learn the art of putting on a face that masks one's true inner feelings. The importance of wearing the proper face in the king's presence is illustrated in Nehemiah 2:1 – 2, where Nehemiah recounts how one day when he was sad in the Persian king's presence, and the king noticed, Nehemiah became "very much afraid." As Gordis, 287, remarks, "Dissembling is important for the politician, then as now!"

2 – 4 There are significant grammatical and syntactical difficulties with regard to the relationship between vv.2 and 3 that call into question the usual translation of these verses. Also, it is difficult to understand contextually the command not to be in a hurry to leave the king's presence, since the next line warns against standing in an evil matter, presumably still in the king's presence. Some recent commentators, in contrast to the usual understanding reflected in most translations (including the NIV), read the last phrase in v.2 as part of the same sentence as the beginning of v.3, thus resulting in the translation, "and in regards to the oath of God, do not be in a rush. Leave his presence" (so Fox, *Time to*

Tear Down, 273, 276 – 77; Longman, 209, 211). Other commentators have argued that the verb translated "be in a hurry" (*tibbah*m *el*m) should be understood instead as "be terrified" (so Crenshaw, 148, 150; Seow, 276, 279 – 80). Following this line, the NRSV translates, "Do not be terrified, go from his presence."

This matter is difficult to decide, but perhaps it is best to go with the first option. On this understanding, the person being addressed in this passage — possibly some courtier or one of the king's advisors — has made some suggestion or advised a course of action that the king has rejected.Qohelet's advice is to guard the king's mouth, i.e.,don't argue with him, and certainly don't do so with an oath. As soon as is appropriately possible, leave his presence, and don't stubbornly maintain your position, for the only result will be evil for you.The king is going to do what the king is going to do.

We might compare this situation to that of Ahithophel, one of David's advisors, who betrayed him and became advisor to David's son Absalom, who was in the midst of an attempted coup against his father. Ahithophel gave Absalom some advice as to how to capture David, but Absalom followed another advisor's counsel instead. Seeing that his advice was rejected, Ahithophel left and hung himself (2Sa 17:1 – 23). Qohelet doesn't counsel suicide, but he does suggest leaving the king's presence as soon as possible.

5 – 6 The king must be obeyed, and for those who do so, harm from the king can usually be avoided. Of course, as suggested by the following verses, there is always the possibility of a certain arbitrariness or capriciousness to the king's actions, which, like God's capriciousness (see comments on 3:15 – 22; 7:13 – 14), keeps us guessing and thus instills greater fear of the king.

Nevertheless, Qohelet does suggest that the wise man should be able by his wisdom to figure out the proper times and procedures with regard to coming and going and behavior in the king's presence. He affirms that there are indeed such times in v.6, but then he begins to qualify this affirmation by noting that "a man's misery" (lit., "the evil of a man," i.e., his misfortunes) weighs "heavily upon him." Elsewhere in Ecclesiastes the idea of a burden that weighs heavily on people has to do with their not being able to figure things out (1:12; 3:10 – 11). It is no different here. There are proper times when the wise should be able to

figure them out. But unfortunately, this confidence hangs under the cloud of the rhetorical question in v.1: “Who is so wise?” The answer is, “No one.”

7 – 8 The reason no one can be sure is that no one knows what will be, nor is there anyone who can tell him. No one can truly know the outcome of one’s actions — and in this context in particular, his actions before the king. To make matters worse, accompanying the ignorance is weakness (see comments on 6:10 – 12), or more precisely, lack of authority (*šallîṭ* [NIV, “power”] is better translated “authority” or “proprietorship”). There is probably an intentional ambiguity in the use of the word “wind” (*rûaḥ*, GK 8120). While it may indeed mean “wind,” it is probably also to remind the reader of another meaning,“life-breath” (its meaning in 3:19, 21; 12:7).

What heightens this probability is the next line, which says that no one has authority over the day of death. (We should note here that only one person has ever truly had authority over the day of his death in such a way that he also had authority over life: “I lay down my life — only to take it up again.No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again” [Jn 10:17 – 18].)

The meaning of the third line in v.8 has been debated. Most modern commentaries and translations have proposed something like “discharge” for the noun *mišlaḥat* (GK 5449). But in the only other place the word occurs in the OT (Ps 78:49), it refers to a “*band* of destroying angels” (“company,”NRSV; “detachment,” NJB). Seow, 282 – 83, has proposed the translation “substitution,” referring to the practice of allowing a person, for a payment of money, to send someone to battle in their place.But it is difficult to see how either the idea of “discharge” or “substitution” connects well with the meaning of “detachment” in Psalm 78.

It seems best to understand this line to be in a close parallel relationship with the last line of the verse, which speaks of rescue; therefore, retaining the meaning “detachment” or “company,” I translate, “There will be no detachment on the day of battle.” (The LXX’s *enhēmera polemou* may be a translation of a Hebrew text that had “in the day of battle” rather than the MT’s “in the battle.”) Seow, 283, has cogently argued for the intriguing suggestion that the battle here refers to an individual’s personal struggle with death. If that is the case, then the

message of this line is that on the day of your appointed struggle with death, don't expect a detachment (of angels or otherwise) to come to your aid. On the day of your death, the cavalry will not come to the rescue.

The last line in v.8 says that wickedness will not effectuate an escape either; literally it reads, "wickedness will not rescue its owners." To talk about one as "owning" wickedness seems awkward, which has occasioned the NIV's rendering "those who practice." As well, it seems strange to introduce a moralizing concept in the last line when morality has not been at issue. Consequently, some commentators have suggested either that the word "wickedness" (*reša'*) has been metathesized from the Hebrew word for "wealth" (*'ōšer*), with the first and third consonants being switched, or that "wickedness" is a metonymy for the profit that might come from engaging in wicked practices, though this last option retains the moralizing concept. The metathesis possibility is attractive.

9 There is some ambiguity over whether "to his own hurt" refers to the man who "lords it over others" (lit., "over a man") or to the man who is "lorded over." The latter seems more in line with the context. Almost certainly, the man who "lords"here is the king, and those over whom he lords are the subjects — and more particularly the courtiers. It is another example of the oppression that Qohelet has had the privilege of witnessing in his absurd life (see 4:1 – 3; 7:15).

NOTES

1 The LXX gives evidence of having had a Hebrew text that read כֹּה חָכָם (*kōh ḥākām*, "so wise") rather than כְּחָכָם (*k'heḥākām*, "like the wise man"). This reading probably makes better sense in the context.

2 In the MT the first word in the verse is אֲנִי (*'ănî*, "I") but is not attached syntactically to any other word in the verse; it is also untranslated by most ancient versions. The NIV leaves it untranslated; the NASB does translate it and provides the verb "say." It is possible that some word like "say" has dropped out of the verse. Another possibility is that the word is a dittography or corrupted suffix from the last word of v.1. Still another suggestion is that the word is from an otherwise biblically unattested אַנְפֵּי (*'anpê*, "in the presence of ") but this causes problems because of the unassimilated *nun* (נ), as well as trying to account for the

lack of the letter *peh* (פ)

6. The Inversion of Justice and Injustice (8:10 – 17)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet has described the problem of injustice before (3:16; 4:1 – 3; 5:8 – 11), and now he addresses it again for the last time (though it still lies in the background of all of his thought, especially with reference to what he himself perceives to be the injustice of God).

> 10 Then too, I saw the wicked buried — those who used to come and go from the holy place and
> receive praise in the city where they did this. This too is meaningless.
>
> 11 When the sentence for a crime is not quickly carried out, the hearts of the people are filled with
> schemes to do wrong. 12 Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long
> time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. 13 Yet
> because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen
> like a shadow.
>
> 14 There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked
> deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. 15 So I
> commend the enjoyment of life, because nothing is better for a man under the sun than to eat and
> drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany him in his work all the days of the life God has given
> him under the sun.
>
> 16 When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth — his eyes not
> seeing sleep day or night — 17 then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes
> on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a
> wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

COMMENTARY

10 This is an exceptionally difficult verse to translate. Space limitations preclude covering all the suggested translations and text-critical emendations

that have been made for the verse. (Some of them are briefly mentioned in the notes.) The rendering adopted here is, “Then too, I have seen the wicked being buried. And they came and from the holy place they went. But forgotten were those who had done righteously.” This translation, while not adopting all the particulars, most closely follows the suggestions of Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 282 – 83) and Seow (276, 284 – 86).

The first sentence sets the stage with the observation of the funerals of wicked people.The second sentence is about those who came to the holy place (most likely a synagogue) to honor the dead and then exited the holy place to join in the funeral procession. The third sentence then completes the picture of what Qohelet calls absurd: those who had done righteously were forgotten. It is oppressive for him to think that the wicked are buried with pomp and great honor (cf. Job 21:32 – 33), while the righteous are forgotten.

11 Building on this example, Qohelet complains that the lack of swift retribution for wicked crimes only encourages further wickedness. In the case just mentioned in v.10 — that of wicked people’s burial with full honors — there is no longer even the possibility of retribution for crimes committed. While initially one might think that Qohelet’s complaint is against those in the city who have honored the wicked and forgotten the righteous, the very fact that death has entered the picture means that, ultimately, his complaint is against God, who has allowed the wicked to go beyond the jurisdiction where justice can be meted out.

12 – 15 There is little, if any, justification for translating the initial word of v.12 (כִּי *ki*) as the concessive “although”; rather, it should be translated “for.”In the Hebrew of this verse there is no noun to go with the adjective “hundred.” Some of the suggested translations are “a hundred times,”“a hundred years,” and “the evil of a hundred [or ‘hundreds’].”Whatever is the case, the first line of v.12 provides a further example of the complaint in v.12: “For a sinner does evil a hundred (times?) but lives long.”

In the rest of vv.12 – 13, Qohelet says that he knows that good will come to those who fear God, but good will not come to the wicked who do not fear God, and they will not live long. But this stands in direct contradiction not only to what he has just said, but also to what he will continue to say in v.14. The introduction of this more traditional sentiment is so jarring that many

commentators have argued that this is a secondary addition from a more orthodox editor. Others, who wish to understand Qohelet as more pious to begin with, grasp at any orthodox straw offered and suggest that here Qohelet's true heart shines through.

But in the light of the surrounding context, as well as the book as a whole, it is more realistic to see these comments as a parenthetical concession to traditional wisdom: "I know the teaching," says Qohelet,"and if push came to shove I would probably subscribe, but. . . ." Then he proceeds to give more examples of evidence to the contrary and pronounces the whole situation to be meaningless.Then he does what he usually does when backed into the absurd corner: he recommends, in another of his so-called *carpe diem* verses, that one simply try to enjoy life. He can't think of anything better.

16 – 17 Qohelet, in his search for wisdom, observes the "labor" (*ʿinyān*,better "burden" or "task"; see comment on 1:13) that is done on the earth. Part of what he "sees" is that one does not "see" sleep (both instances use the verb *rāʾâ*). It is unclear whether this sleeplessness describes the plight of people Qohelet has observed or whether it is self-referential (this search, as he said before in 1:13, being *his* task [*ʿinyān*]). Whatever the case, his conclusion is that what he has tried to discover, no one can discover. The works of God cannot be comprehended. A sage may claim that he knows, but he doesn't.

So the rhetorical question he has asked at the beginning of this chapter — "Who is so wise?"— has been answered anyway. No one is so wise that he knows, and no one understands the explanation of things. Or if we leave the question the way it is in most translations, "Who is like the wise man?" the answer is "No one, indeed, not even the wise man is like the wise man." There are no wise people, only those whom God has given for a few short years the task of trying to find wisdom, yet has not given along with the task the ability to find it. To Qohelet, this is absurd.

NOTES

10 A list of only the more important textual and semantic problems in the verse include the following questions. Note that my decisions on these questions

can be seen in the translation offered in the exposition. (1) Should the MT's רְשָׁעִים קְבֻרִים וַיָּבֹאוּ (*rᵉšāʿîm qᵉburîm wāyyābōʾû,* "the wicked buried and they came") be emended in accord with the LXX to רְשָׁעִים קֶבֶר מוֹבָאִים (*rᵉšāʿîm qeber môbāʾîm,* "the wicked being brought to the grave")?

(2) Should וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ (*ûmimmᵉqôm qādôš,* "and from the place of the holy [one]") be emended to וּמִמְּקוֹם קָדוֹשׁ (*ûmimmāqôm qādôš,* "and from a holy place")?

(3) Should וַיִּשְׁתַּכְּחוּ (*wᵉyištakkᵉḥû,* "and they were forgotten") be alternatively translated, "and they were neglected," or should it be emended to וַיִּשְׁתַּבְּחוּ (*wᵉyištabbᵉḥû,* "and they were praised")?

(4) Should אֲשֶׁר (*ᵃšer*) be translated "where" (referring to "the city") or "who" (referring to the subject of the verb "had done")?

(5) Should the subject for כֵּן עָשׂוּ (*kēn-ʿāśû*) be understood as the previously mentioned wicked and translated "they had done thus," or should it be understood as a new subject for the verb "forgotten," and the whole last phrase, אֲשֶׁר כֵּן עָשׂוּ (*ᵃšer kēn-ʿāśû*) be translated "those who had done righteously" (with כֵּן [*kēn*] being not the adverb "thus" but either the noun "right" or the adverb "righteously")?

13 כַּצֵּל (*kaṣṣēl,* "like a shadow") has been understood in two different ways, depending on whether one sees the phrase as modifying the verb "lengthen" or the noun "days." With the first option, the lengthening of the shadow represents long life. But elsewhere, when the imagery of the shadow is used to describe length of life, it indicates fleetingness and brevity (see 6:12; also 1Ch 29:15; Job 8:9; 14:2; Pss 102:11; 109:23; 144:4). In the story of the sign given to Hezekiah (2Ki 20:9 – 11), the lengthening shadow is symbolic of shortness of life, not length. It may be best, therefore, to take "like a shadow" in this verse as modifying days, thus, "they will not lengthen their days, which are like a shadow."

7. The Hand of Fate and the Serendipity of the Hand (9:1 – 10)

OVERVIEW

There are many ways in which this section could be titled and summarized. The NIV's heading works well, "A Common Destiny for All." The title given here is based on the two occurrences of the word "hand" in the first and last verses of the passage — in v.1 a reference to the hand of God, and in v.10 to a human hand.The difference between these two hands will become apparent in the exposition below.

1 So I reflected on all this and concluded that the righteous and the wise and what they do are in
God's hands, but no man knows whether love or hate awaits him. 2 All share a common destiny —
the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer
sacrifices and those who do not.

As it is with the good man,
so with the sinner;
as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.

3 This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts
of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward
they join the dead. 4 Anyone who is among the living has hope — even a live dog is better off than a
dead lion!

5 For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even the memory of them is forgotten.

6 Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;
never again will they have a part
in anything that happens under the sun.

7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God
favors what you do. 8 Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. 9 Enjoy life
with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under
the sun — all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the
sun. 10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are
going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet, taking into consideration what he has already recounted and anticipating what he is about to relate, acknowledges that the righteous and the wise are in the hands of God. But there is little comfort to be derived from this assertion, as the next few verses confirm. C. S. Lewis, the great twentieth-century writer and Chris tian apologist, in his book *A Grief Observed* (the chronicle of his emotional anguish after the death of his wife from cancer) tells of his response to well-meaning, would-be comforters who tried to console him with the thought, "She's in God's hands now."

Lewis's response was, "She was in God's hands all the time, and I have seen what those hands did to her here. Do they suddenly become gentler to us the moment we are out of the body?"

Qohelet's problem isn't exactly of the same nature as Lewis's, for Qohelet is unconvinced there is anything beyond the grave. His problem is that there is no way of knowing how those hands will treat one here in *this* life. Even love and hatred are somehow in God's hands, and no one knows whether they will have in this life more of one than the other, or both, or neither. For Qohelet, "'the hand of God' is not a consoling thought or a sign of predilection; it merely designates divine power, from which there is no escape" (Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 90).

2 – 3 After declaring that all have one fate (*miqreh*), Qohelet lists five pairs of human oppositions. (The NIV 's "the good and the bad" is textually problematic, and I have not included it in the list; see Notes.) Regarding the last of the five oppositions, it is not clear which of the two is positive or negative.In the first four pairs the positive member was listed first, so that would argue for seeing "those who take oaths" as being the positive member in the fifth pair. But Qohelet has already twice warned against entering into a vow too quickly (5:4 – 6; 8:2 – 3), so the ambiguity is not totally removed. Perhaps there is a measure of intentional ambiguity in this last pair that reflects the ambiguity of life itself and the lack of any assured correlation between a deed and its consequences.

In v.3 Qohelet labels as an “evil” (*rāʿ*, GK 8274) that God makes no distinction between these moral opposites and rewards one as he does the other.He also complains that human hearts are full of “evil” (*rāʿ*, and madness. It is difficult to be certain whether Qohelet is using “evil” in its moral sense or in the sense of calamity. In support of the moral sense is 8:11, where he says that the hearts of men are filled to do evil (“filled” and “evil” being the same words as in 9:3).Against the moral sense is the use of “evil” in the first part of the verse, where it seems to be used in a nonmoral sense. Also against it is the fact that in the passage Qohelet has made no clear switch from talking about what happens to “all” to talking just about the wicked. It seems more likely that the nonmoral sense is meant here. The verse ends abruptly with the phrase (lit.), “and afterward, to the dead.” After a lifetime of ill fortune and madness — comes death.

4 – 6 Reversing himself from his previous pronouncements concerning the advantage of the dead over the living (4:2), Qohelet now argues that life, though it is full of calamity and madness, is preferable to the alternative, death. He now seems to think that pain and mental anguish are preferable to having no feelings at all. The exact level at which the proverb in v.4 works is unclear. Is he talking about dogs and lions? Or does he expect the reader to make the immediate analogical jump and realize that “‘dog’ (a scavenger) was a metaphor for a contemptible and worthless person, whereas ‘lion’ designated a prince or person of great worth” (Crenshaw, 161)?

Whatever the case, Qohelet says that even the dog has “hope” or “confidence” (*bitṭâḥôn*; there is some debate over the exact nuance). In what this “hope” or “confidence” consists is not communicated precisely, unless we are to understand that Qohelet is being ironic and that it consists in nothing more than what is related in v.5. In a statement that, had it been written two thousand years later, could have been seen as a cruel parody of Descartes’ famous line, “I think, therefore I am,” Qohelet says, “I know I’m going to die; therefore, I’m alive and have the advantage over those who are dead and know nothing.” If this is, in fact, the “hope” of which he speaks, it is ironic indeed. Or perhaps we are to understand that the hope refers to all the things he says the dead do not have — reward, being remembered, love, hate, jealousy.

Notice, again, that by including “hate” and “jealousy” in the list, the idea of “better to have bad feelings than no feelings at all” is reinforced.Especially

painful is the erasure of any memory that this person had ever lived. A graveyard I visited recently illustrates Qohelet's point. The graveyard was unkempt, overgrown with thick brush and tall weeds, and several of the tombstones had weathered so badly that the inscriptions were no longer legible. For some graves there was no tombstone, only two crossed wooden sticks with writing that could barely be made out. Ironically, at the entrance to this graveyard was the sign, "Forever Remembered." Qohelet is firmly convinced that the sign makes false claims. And it does not matter whether the deceased was wise or foolish, righteous or wicked — one fate fits all.

7 – 9 We come now to the last of the so-called *carpe diem* passages in the book (unless one also includes 11:7 – 10; see Message and Purpose in the introduction and the exposition at 2:24 – 26). All of these passages have come after Qohelet has painted his picture of life's absurdity with the darkest colors on his palette. Having painted this last picture especially dark, he now correspondingly gives his most detailed advice as to how to live in the light of this absurdity. We have already seen the advice to eat, to drink, and to be joyful (2:24 – 26; 3:12 – 13, 22; 5:18 – 20; 8:15), but now are added one new perspective and three new pieces of advice.

The new perspective is that God has "already"(*kebār*)approved your deeds (so NASB, preferable to NIV's "now"; the same word is translated by the NIV as "long since" in v.6). What the approved deeds are is not said specifically, though it is most likely the actions of joyfully eating and drinking. But this statement raises the question as to how Qohelet knows that these deeds have been approved. The answer is provided by the contrast with v.6. There, as we have just seen, the love, the hate, and the jealousy of the dead have "already" (*kebār*) perished. How does Qohelet know this? Because they're dead! In the same way, Qohelet knows that God has already approved your eating and drinking and feasting and making merry. How does he know this? Because you're alive and doing these things.

Qohelet had already said that the ability to eat and drink and be joyful is the gift of God (3:13;5:19). Automatically then, if you are doing these things, you must be among the gifted ones. Fox puts it well: "As always when praising pleasure, Qohelet observes that it is God's gift. Now he goes farther:not only does God allow you enjoyment, he *wants* you to have it — if you are one of the fortunate"(*Time to Tear Down* , 294; similarly Crenshaw, 162).But remember,

you will not always be so fortunate.And one day, the “already” that will be said about you is that you have “already” lost any participation in the course of human events (i.e., “under the sun”), and your love and hate and jealousy will have long since vanished.

Two of the three new pieces of advice are always to dress in white and to anoint your head with oil.The “always” character of this advice is striking.While many commentators regard these two pieces of advice as being somewhat “festive” in their orientation, it is also important to see that the advice is not, as it were, to be continually in attendance at parties and feasts; rather, the advice is to turn every day into a festive occasion. Delitzsch, 363, referencing 2 Samuel 14:2, notes that white clothes “are in contrast to the black robes of mourning” and that “sorrow and anointing exclude one another.” To dress in white and to anoint your head with oil is to hold your own small celebration of the fact that for at least one more day you have cheated death and the grave, where feasting no longer occurs.

The third piece of advice is to enjoy life with a woman that you love. Because the definite article “the” is not attached to the word “woman” in the Hebrew, there has been much discussion as to whether we are to understand this woman to be one’s wife. If at this point in the book the reader is still supposed to be making Solomonic connections, the recall of the narratives about that king’s seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines might suggest that Qohelet is saying flippantly, “Just pick one!” More likely, however, the text is meant to be ambiguous. The woman may be one’s wife, or she may not, though there is no justification for any interpretation that would include adultery or promiscuity (at least as understood by ancient Near Eastern conventions). We should probably also relate this advice to 4:8, where Qohelet complained about the man for whom there was “no second”with whom to share his joy (see comments).

It has become commonplace in commentaries to note the similarities between this passage and the Epic of Gilgamesh, a text that dates to around the eighteenth century BC — over thirteen hundred years before Ecclesiastes. The protagonist, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is given some advice by Shiduri, a tavern keeper (*The Epic of Gilgamesh:The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* , trans. by Andrew George [London:Penguin, 1999], 124):

> Said the tavern-keeper to him, to Gilgamesh:

"O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life that you seek you never will find:
when the gods created mankind,
death they dispensed to mankind,
life they kept for themselves.
But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
dance and play day and night!
Let your clothes be clean,
let your head be washed, may you bathe
in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!
For such is the destiny [of mortal men]."

As one can easily see, there is a striking similarity between this ancient text and Ecclesiastes 9:7 – 10, not just in the particulars but also in general tone. Karel van der Toorn, however, warns against too quick an assumption that the author of Ecclesiastes has simply borrowed wholesale from this text, or at least exclusively so; he notes other ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts that express similar sentiments ("Did Ecclesiastes Copy Gilgamesh?" *BRev* 16, no. 1 [2000]: 22 – 30, 50). But at the very least, we can say that Qohelet's thinking was certainly not anomalous in the ancient Near East.

Twice in v.9 Qohelet refers to absurdity:"all the days of this meaningless life . . . all your meaningless days." Many commentators argue that the second occurrence should be deleted and note that several ancient versions, including one LXX text (Alexan-drinus) and a few Hebrew manuscripts, do not have it. But in addition to the fact that all other LXX texts do have it, the retention makes better sense for at least two reasons. First, since the repetition is not an exact one — the first phrase uses the word "life" whereas the second one does not — accidental omission on the part of these manuscripts, rather than accidental duplication, seems to be the more easily made mistake. But more important, as Gordis, 306, notes, the repeated but shortened phrase "gives a haunting effect, like the Kinah [lament] rhythm." In the midst of his encouragement to live life to the fullest, Qohelet still sings a dirge.

He goes on to encourage excellence in the art of making merry — if you are one of the fortunate ones whose hand has serendipitously found opportunity to do so. It is significant that among the four things he lists in v.10 as missing from the place to which all are going, he saves "wisdom" for last. All along he has been on a quest, by his wisdom, to find wisdom (7:23). But in the end, no one is wise.He had declared that "wisdom preserves the life of its possessor" (7:12). But now, in this sad verse, we find out that, at most, all it really ever does is delay the inevitable.

NOTES

1 – 2 Some commentators favor understanding that the end of v.1 and the beginning of v.2 constitute a clause and emend the first word in v.2 from הַכֹּל (*hakkōl*, "the all") to הַבֶל(*habel*, "absurdity") thus resulting in the reading, "Everything before them is absurdity. Since all share a common destiny. . . ." There is also versional support for this reading. It is an attractive suggestion, but the MT as it stands is not unintelligible.

2 After the phrase "the righteous and the wicked," the MT has לַטּוֹב (*laṭṭôb*, "to the good"), to which the NIV adds, "and the bad" (see text note), in order to provide an opposing term in accordance with all the other pairs in the verse. But in accord with some versional evidence and the word's reccurrence in the same verse ("the good man . . . the sinner"), it is more likely that it should be deleted.

4 In place of the MT's *Kethib* יִבְחַר (*yibḥar*,"he will choose") or יִבָּחֵר (*yibbāḥēr*,"he will be chosen") is the *Qere* יֶחֱבַר (*yeḥubbar*, "is joined"), adopted by most translations and commentators.

9 Addison Wright prefers dropping the second *hebel* phrase, "meaningless days," not only in accordance with evidence from some of the versions, but also because retaining it would result in thirty-eight occurrences of the word *hebel* in the book, whereas the word's numerical value is thirty-seven. On his numerical analysis of how *hebel* is used in Ecclesiastes, it should occur only thirty-seven times ("The Riddle of the Sphinx Revisited: Numerical Patterns in the Book of Qoheleth," *CBQ* 42 [1980]: 44). While Wright's thesis about the craft with which the author may have structured the book numerically certainly has merit,

even being adopted by Roland Murphy (*Wisdom Literature*, 127 – 29; idem, *Ecclesiastes*, xxxviii – xli), a text-critical decision to delete a phrase for numerical reasons seems tenuous.

8. Time and Chance (9:11 – 12)

11 I have seen something else under the sun:

The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.

12 Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:

As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times
that fall unexpectedly upon them.

COMMENTARY

11 – 12 Like the wind, again Qohelet turns (*sābab*, GK 6015), going around in circles (see comments on 1:6 and 2:20), and finds another example of oppressive absurdity. In v.11 he lists five areas in which one should always be able to predict the outcome. The first two, a race and a battle, are physical activities that by their very nature should turn out in favor of the fastest and the strongest. The last three, the states of being wise, brilliant, and learned, should bring to their possessors wealth and favor (whether from God or people is not indicated). But Qohelet says that doesn't happen.

Some translations qualify each of these statements with the word "always," but the qualification is unnecessary for two reasons. First, it is common for poetry in any language to be somewhat hyperbolic in expression, and adding the word "always"takes away this poetic character. Second, it is at least possible that

Qohelet is not being hyperbolic but that he really means what he says. Even though we might think the fastest person won the race and the strongest person won the battle, in actuality all that we have really witnessed is one person's taking a temporary lead. In reality, every contest ends in a tie — the loser and the winner both die. The only real winners are "time and chance" — they conquer all.

Furthermore, we don't know when "time and chance" will claim their victory. For just like fish and birds who are caught in nets and snares as they are about to get their food, just when we think we are about to make it, we end up springing the traps that time and chance have laid out for us. Of course, the thoughtful reader should take the logical step and ask, "Who is it, then, that controls time and chance?" For Qohelet, the answer, as we have seen all along, is oppressive.

NOTES

11 פֶּגַע (*pegaʿ*, "chance"; GK 7004), only occurs elsewhere in 1 Kings 5:4, where it is qualified with the word "evil." It is difficult to say with certainty whether the word by itself is a neutral term and needs a qualifier such as "evil" to communicate the idea of misfortune, or whether it actually means misfortune, with the adjective "evil" in 1 Kings 5:4 simply intensifying the inherent meaning.

12 The NIV's "when his hour will come" is literally "his time," but the translation certainly captures the idea in our more current idiom that this time is, in fact, the time of one's death.

9. A Forgotten Sage (9:13 – 18)

> 13 I also saw under the sun this example of wisdom that greatly impressed me: 14 There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siegeworks against it. 15Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. 16So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.

17 The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded
than the shouts of a ruler of fools.

18 Wisdom is better than weapons of war,
but one sinner destroys much good.

COMMENTARY

13 – 16 Qohelet now recounts an example of wisdom that greatly impressed him. Unfortunately, the great impression was also one that caused him great depression. He tells what appears to be a fairly straightforward story. A small, sparsely populated city was besieged with huge siegeworks by a great king. A poor but wise man (or "commoner"; so Seow, 310) was found, and he saved the city by his wisdom; but afterwards nobody remembered him.

There are, however, several subtleties in the story that can easily be missed. First, the fact that a great king (some believe this phrase indicates he was an emperor) would build huge siegeworks to capture a small, sparsely populated town seems odd. Second, in a city that had only a few people, why did this wise man have to be "found" or "discovered"? Third, the wisdom of this man must have been truly remarkable for being able to save the city against overwhelming odds. Fourth, how was it possible that in such a small city this man could then be forgotten?

Perhaps it was these tremendous incongruities that caused Qohelet to say that this story "greatly"impressed him. "Impressed" may actually be too positively nuanced; the Hebrew simply says "it was great to me."The translation could just as easily be "it appalled me." Qohelet's initial observation on recounting the story is how much more advantageous wisdom is than strength. But the rest of the story shows how powerless wisdom is when no one pays attention to it.

17 – 18 Rather than the NIV 's translation, which turns the Hebrew in v.17 into a prescription rather than a description, the verse should probably be read as follows:"The words of the wise in quiet are heard more than the cry of a ruler among fools"(with "in quiet" describing the "words of the wise,"not how they are heard). The previous example seems to provide contrary evidence, but the

point being made here is that a wise man can make himself understood in a calm, quiet voice more than can a ruler directing loud rantings toward an audience of fools.

Of course, the problem is that when a wise man addresses a group of fools, who are more impressed by noise than substance, his words are wasted. But when the words are heeded, the weapons of war can be overcome. Yet even then, it only takes one sinner to nullify all the good that either was done or might have been done. Perhaps the implication is that in the previous example, "for one, brief, shining moment" wisdom prevailed and a city was saved. But then wisdom was forgotten and a single fool ended up reversing all the good that was done. Absurd.

NOTES

14 מְצוֹדִים (*mᵉṣôdîm*, "siegeworks") occurs only about six times in the OT, but two of those are Ecclesiastes 7:26 and 9:12, where both times it means something like "snares." This has caused some to suggest that the better reading here would be מְצוּרִים (*mᵉṣûrîm*), an otherwise unattested form apparently derived from the more prevalent term for siege or siegeworks, מָצוֹר (*māṣôr*). This is possible, but it is also possible that, given the few times that מְצוֹדִים occurs, it may indeed have the meaning "siegeworks."

15 There has been much discussion over the exact rendering of וּמִלָּט (*ûmillaṭ*, "and he saved"). Several commentators have opted to understand it as modal, "he might have saved," rather than indicative (see Seow, 310 – 11). Supporting this translation is v.16, which says that the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words not heeded; the NIV adds "no longer" to suggest, perhaps correctly, that the despising and failure to listen came after the rescue. Against this alternative understanding is that on this reading לֹא זָכַר (*lōʾ zākar*, "did not remember") has to be taken in the sense of "did not consider" or "did not give thought to." As attractive as the suggestion is, it seems perhaps best to stay with the traditional understanding.

10. Folly Gets More Press than Wisdom (10:1 – 3)

OVERVIEW

This chapter contains probably the most loosely connected material in the book, and the divisions between individual passages can seem arbitrary.Nevertheless, throughout the chapter the absurdity and topsy-turviness of life continues to be demonstrated. In this first section, we find some thoughts about the garishness of fools and their folly.

1 As dead flies give perfume a bad smell,
so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.

2 The heart of the wise inclines to the right,
but the heart of the fool to the left.

3 Even as he walks along the road,
the fool lacks sense
and shows everyone how stupid he is.

COMMENTARY

1 Despite grammatical problems with the exact understanding of the first line (see Notes), the basic message is clear: as a dead fly (or flies) in perfume can actually reverse the effect so that the perfume becomes foul-smelling, so a little folly can reverse the effects of wisdom and honor. While this can be related to the previous passage — in particular 9:18, with its assertion that one sinner can destroy much good done by a wise person — it is also possible that this verse is making a quite different point, namely, that a wise person who turns to folly makes people forget that he was ever wise. The turning of the wise person into a fool is a distinct possibility (see 7:7), and all that people will remember is the folly.

2 In biblical Hebrew there are no clear instances where “left” refers to evil as there are in later, postbibli-cal Hebrew, though this verse could itself be evidence of the development. In any case, since most people are right-handed, or turn to the right, the fool’s turning aside to the left makes him more conspicuous.Thus folly draws more attention than wisdom.

3 Even in the simple act of walking on a path the fool demonstrates his lack of sense. As Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 302) notes, “One does not need much intelligence when treading along a well-beaten path, such as the highway to a city, whereas in other places, such as the market, the activity may require some application of thought.”

The last line in the verse is capable of at least three different interpretations. Literally it reads,“and he says to everyone he is a fool.” One possibility is that he is calling other people fools. Another is that he proclaims as he walks along, “I am a fool! I am a fool!” The third is that the subject of the verb “says”is the word “heart” (the previous line [NIV , “the fool lacks sense”] being literally, “his heart is lack-ing”). Fox (ibid., 302 – 3) compares this to Proverbs 12:23, “The heart of fools cries out, ‘Folly!’ ”and argues that the idea in v.3 is that a fool’s heart “works against him” and produces behavior that, contrary to what the fool may say, announces to everyone that the person is a fool. It is not impossible that all three interpretations may be correct.The unfortunate thing, as Qohelet sees it, is that whereas fools, by what they say and do, get a lot of attention, wisdom receives comparatively little.

NOTE

1 זְבוּבֵי מָוֶת (*z*ᵉ*bûbê māwet*, “flies of death”) is problematic for two reasons: (1) the phrase “flies of death”doesn’t actually mean dead flies, and (2) the verb that follows, “to cause to stink,” is in the singular. A reasonable emendation, suggested by several commentators, is to read instead זְבוּב יָמוּת (*z*ᵉ*bûb yāmût*,“a fly dies” or “a fly that dies”).

11. Some Loosely Connected Words about Rulers (10:4 – 7)

4 If a ruler’s anger rises against you,
do not leave your post;
calmness can lay great errors to rest.

5 There is an evil I have seen under the sun,
the sort of error that arises from a ruler:

6 Fools are put in many high positions,
while the rich occupy the low ones.

7 I have seen slaves on horseback,
while princes go on foot like slaves.

4 Qohelet now gives some advice about behavior *before* rulers and then makes some observations about the behavior *of* rulers. It is unclear whether the "ruler" (*mōšēl*) in v.4 is to be understood as a king, with Qohelet having much to say about kings in other passages, or is a lesser, perhaps provincial, official. If he is not a king, that may explain the contradiction between the advice given here and that given in 8:3, where he encourages leaving a king's presence should he become upset.

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for the biblical wisdom material to give apparently contradictory advice, on the expectation that the wise person will know which piece of advice to follow when (cf. Pr 26:4 – 5). In this case, Qohelet advises that one should not leave when the ruler gets upset but retain calmness and composure, thus being able to appease the ruler's anger even with regard to great "offenses" (rather than "errors").

5 – 7 Qohelet expresses indignation about a certain kind of error rulers make — that of putting fools in positions of authority but rich people in lower positions. He provides a concrete example with his observation of servants riding on horseback while princes walk on foot.

We must note two important things here. First, Qohelet is complaining about a world that seems to have been turned upside-down. Things are not the way they should be, and higher values have been exchanged for lower ones. But second, there seems to be a bit of class-snobbishness on Qohelet's part in that his distinction is not between fools and the wise or righteous; rather, it is between fools and the wealthy and then between servants and princes. This should remind us that although Qohelet has some legitimate complaints about the absurdity of life, some of those absurdities are related more to his own vested interests rather than the common lot of humankind.

NOTE

4 There seems to be a wordplay using the same root word with two different meanings: תַּנַּח (*tannaḥ*, "leave") and יַנִּיחַ (*yanniaḥ*, "lay . . . to rest"), both from the root נוּחַ (*nûaḥ*,' "rest, settle").

There have been several suggested meanings for מַרְפֵּא (*marpē*',' "calmness"), such as "gentleness," "composure," "soothing," and "pacifying." It is evidently a derivative of the root רָפָא (*rāpā*',' "to heal").

12. Some Occupational Hazards and Difficulties (10:8 – 11)

OVERVIEW

These verses deal with various occupational hazards (vv.8 – 9) or with problems to be encountered in the performance of one's task (vv.10 – 11). It is important to note from the outset that with regard to the hazards there is no indication of moral judgments being made, nor, for that matter, are there any evaluations of the skills or work ethic of the tradesmen to whom these accidents happen. Nor is there any indication that the "accidents" are due to carelessness; they just happen. It appears to be different, however, for v.10. In v.11, whether there is blame to be assigned is unclear.

8 Whoever digs a pit may fall into it;
whoever breaks through a wall may be bitten by a snake.

9 Whoever quarries stones may be injured by them;
whoever splits logs may be endangered by them.

10 If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed
but skill will bring success.

11 If a snake bites before it is charmed,

there is no profit for the charmer.

COMMENTARY

8 Though the first example in the verse is used elsewhere in the wisdom literature as a metaphor for how the wicked plot to destroy the righteous only to have the plot turn against them (Pss 7:15;9:15; 35:7 – 8; 57:6; Pr 26:27; 28:10), there is no such connotation in this passage; the digging of a pit could simply be in order to make a well or to set a trap for wild animals. Likewise, in the second example there could be a number of reasons why a person might want to break through or tear down a wall that was no longer serving a purpose. Walls built of stone without mortar could easily become habitations for snakes.

9 There are several dangers involved in quarrying rock or splitting logs. Interestingly, in the second example, though we would normally think that the primary danger in splitting logs would be from the axe, the implication of the Hebrew is that the injury may be caused by the logs themselves.This parallels the first example, in which the injury is caused by the rocks.

10 Though the grammar and syntax of this verse are difficult (see Notes), the message seems clear: in the words of a more recent proverb, “more sweating at the stone — less sweating in the field.” The last line seems to suggest that the wise person will take care to spend the proper amount of time sharpening the axe at the stone.

11 There is some ambiguity as to the meaning of v.11 — and perhaps intentionally, to allow the verse to be read both ways. The common understanding is that the snake bites before the charmer is able to arrive and prevent it from doing so by his incantations. But the Hebrew of the verse, “if the snake bites without a charm,” also allows the interpretation that the snake bites without having been charmed to do so. (For this line of interpretation in the Talmud and other rabbinical sources, see Del-itzsch, 382; Gordis, 323.) On this interpretation, the desired action occurs before the charmer can do his work, so that the charmer receives no fee — he wasn’t needed in the first place.

Whatever the case may be, it should be noted that unlike v.10, there is nothing

in the verse that suggests the charmer was late or negligent. It just happened. Wisdom and skill are wonderful things to have, but opportunity is needed as well. You have to be diligent, but you also have to be fortunate.

NOTE

10 Though there are several unique lexical and grammatical features about this verse that present some problems, it is especially the last three words that are the main issue. The *Kethib* of the MT has וְיִתְרוֹן הַכְשֵׁיר חָכְמָה (*wᵉyitrôn hakšēr ḥokmâ*,"the advantage of to be successful [or 'to succeed'] is wis-dom"), the middle word being a Hiphil infinitive construct (the *Qere* reads it as an infinitive absolute). Several solutions have been presented. Anthony Frendo recommends recognizing the construction as a broken construct chain and reading, "the advantage to wisdom is success [or 'to succeed']" ("The 'Broken Construct Chain' in Qoh 10:10b," *Bib* 62 [1981], 544 – 45). Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 306) favors repointing the infinitive construct to a nominal form and reading, "the advantage of the skilled man is wisdom." Seow, 307, 318, favors understanding the verb to have the meaning "to appropriate" and translates, "It is an advantage to appropriate wisdom." Whichever solution one opts for, the intent of the verse still seems clear.

13. Some Words about Words (10:12 – 15)

12 Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious,
but a fool is consumed by his own lips.

13 At the beginning his words are folly;
at the end they are wicked madness —

14 and the fool multiplies words.
No one knows what is coming —
who can tell him what will happen after him?

15 A fool's work wearies him;
he does not know the way to town.

COMMENTARY

12 This passage is about fools, but in particular about their words, which turn their owners into self-destructive, raving mad ranters of meaningless verbiage. That the words of the wise are gracious is commonplace in Wisdom literature (see, e.g.,Pr 10:11, 20; 15:4; 16:21, 24; 20:15). Qohelet calls attention to the observation, but primarily to set up his more extensive description of the fool and his words. The implication of the first line is that the graciousness of the wise person's speech has a pleasant effect on *others*. But the fool's speech results in *self*-destruction. Of course, gracious words are also good for their owner, and fools' words can also be destructive of others. But the critical point here is that the fool's speech hurts himself.

13 If a fool gives a speech, and at the beginning it sounds like nonsense, then wait till you hear the end of the speech! While this could almost be funny, unfortunately the madness at the end of the speech is characterized by "wickedness" or "evil" as well."When words are many, sin is not absent" (Pr 10:19).

14 While some commentators suggest that the first line should be seen as concluding the thought of v.13 and has nothing to do with what follows (cf. NIV), it is more probable that the last two lines of v.14 are reinforcing the first line (cf. NASB).The fool multiplies words. Thinking that he knows a lot about everything, including what's going to happen in the future, he prattles on ad nauseum. He thinks he knows a lot about the future, but the rest of the verse says no one really knows what's going to happen, nor is anyone able to tell anyone else.

But something subtler is going on here as well.The point is being demonstrated. Qohelet has already talked about ignorance of the future several times before (3:22; 6:12; 7:14; 8:7, 16 – 17), and now he takes two more repetitive lines to say it again. If a fool multiplies words to pontificate the future, Qohelet has multiplied words to pontificate the fool's ignorance. Perhaps Qohelet is the fool.

15 There are two grammatical problems with the first line in this verse. The Hebrew reads literally, "the work of fools wearies him." The first problem is that

the noun “work” is masculine, but the verb “wearies” is feminine. The second is that “fools” is plural, but the pronominal suffix “him” on the verb is singular. As for the gender issue, I agree with Seow, 320 (cf. BDB, 765), that the best solution is simply to understand that the word for “work” is here being used as a feminine noun, possibly because it is being used as an abstract noun. With regard to the number problem, the best solution is to understand that the antecedent for the suffix “him” on the verb “wearies” is not “fools,” but the particular fool who has been the example in the previous verses.

In other words, the first line could be rendered, “The work that fools do wearies him,” i.e., “The work that fools have been assigned to do wearies him.” And the work that has been assigned to fools is to engage in endless talk out of the fullness of their ignorance, especially regarding the future. The irony is that they do not even know the directions to town, “the best-known place in the region” (Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 308).

NOTES

14 Some of the versions as well as some Hebrew manuscripts read מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה (*mah-šehāyâ*, “what has happened”) rather than the MT’s מַה־שֶּׁיִּהְיֶה(*mah šeyyihyeh*., “what will be”). The MT makes more sense in the context.

15 Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 308) has argued for an emendation to solve the grammatical difficulties in v.15, namely, that of changing עֲמַל הַכְּסִילִים תְּיַגְּעֶנּוּ (*ʿmal hakkᵉsîlîm tᵉyaggᵉennû*,“the toil of the fools wearies him”) to עֲמַל הַכְּסִיל תְּיַגְּעֶנּוּ (*ʿmal hakkᵉsîl tᵉyaggᵉennû*,“the toil of the fool wearies him”). The solution proposed above leaves the MT as is and correctly, I believe, catches the nuance of the verse.

14. Some Loosely Connected Words about Royalty (10:16 – 20)

OVERVIEW

In vv.5 – 7 the concern was about rulers who put fools and the lowborn into

positions of authority, while they put the rich and princes in positions of lower authority. But what if the king himself is low born and princes act like fools?

16 Woe to you, O land whose king was a servant
and whose princes feast in the morning.

17 Blessed are you, O land whose king is of noble birth
and whose princes eat at a proper time —
for strength and not for drunkenness.

18 If a man is lazy, the rafters sag;
if his hands are idle, the house leaks.

19 A feast is made for laughter,
and wine makes life merry,
but money is the answer for everything.

20 Do not revile the king even in your thoughts,
or curse the rich in your bedroom,
because a bird of the air may carry your words,
and a bird on the wing may report what you say.

COMMENTARY

16 – 17 The NIV has opted for "servant" to translate *naʿar* but in a footnote calls attention to another possibility, "child"; both meanings are well attested.

In this verse, though the king's youth may be part of the problem, the fact that the contrasting term in v.17 is *ben-ḥôrîm* ("son of nobility") suggests that more than youth and immaturity are at issue. Given the previous instances where Qohelet has betrayed his class bias (6:8; 10:5 – 7), we should probably take this as another display of it. Somehow, a boor has become king. When that happens, the princes of the land also act like boors. They do not contain their times of feasting to the evening but also eat and feast during the daytime, when they should be accomplishing business (cf. Isa 5:11; also Pr 31:4 – 5).Woe to the land in which this happens.

But the land is blessed when the king is wellborn, for then its princes feast at the proper time.The NIV 's "for strength and not for drunkenness"implies, as do other translations, that the princes eat to build up their strength and not to become drunk. To achieve this meaning, however, the same word that was translated "feast" in v.16 (yō'kĕlû) is here translated "eat." It seems better to understand that "feast" is meant in both verses. And the purpose of feasting is not to build up one's strength. Thus bigbînwould be better translated "*in* strength" or "with strength," which, in contrast to "drunkenness," would mean something like, "with manly self-control." (For this interpretation see Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 308; Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 104; Seow, 328, 330). Blessed is the land in which this happens.

18 Commentators are divided as to how, or even whether, vv.18 – 19 relate to the surrounding verses and to each other. The position taken here is that while these verses, which may have been popular proverbs of the day, were not necessarily coined in connection with the matters Qohelet mentions in this section, the frame-narrator places them here because he perceives them as in some way being a commentary on what has just been said in vv.16 – 17.Thus v.18 relates to v.16, and v.19 to v.17.

The surface meaning of v.18 is easily understood:Laziness and idleness let a house fall into disrepair.Though many commentators dismiss the possibility, it is likely that "house" is used here to refer to the kingdom or the "royal house." Seow, 331, calls attention to various places where "house" means just that, both in biblical texts (e.g., 1Sa 20:16; 2Sa 7:11;1Ki 12:26; 13:2; Isa 7:2, 13) and in Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Akkadian texts. The "house"of state will not last long when lowborn men rule it and when its princes feast endlessly and never attend to the administration of the kingdom.

19 This verse affirms that feasting is for laughter and drinking wine is for merriment. Nothing negative is implied here. Among those commentators that do see a relationship between vv.16 – 17 and vv.18 – 19, this verse is usually understood as a negative comment related to v.16, as is v.18. The positive tone of these lines, however, does not fit the negative situation in v.16. It is better to see here an affirmation that feasting done at the proper time, as is the case in v.17, is entirely appropriate.

The last line is enigmatic, inasmuch as the verb “answer” (*ʿānâ*) has a wide variety of meanings.Probably, “everything” (*hakkōl*)should be taken as the equivalent of “both,” referring to the activities of eating and drinking, and the verb should be taken to mean “provide” (see Gordis, 328; Whybray, 157;Longman, 252). To feast and make merry require money.This is not a critical comment, but it is perhaps a somewhat grudging or resentful one: You have to be one of God’s favorites to be gifted with the money that allows an extravagant lifestyle.

20 In the last few verses Qohelet has made a couple of negative comments about kings. (The frame-narrator allows his fictional royal character to do so.) But now he gives a warning that one should not be too vocal in expressing dissatisfaction with the current reigning monarch or the rich, who are most likely in positions of authority. There is even a bit of hyperbole in the first line: “Don’t even think about it!”

The last two lines were probably more sinister-sounding in the ancient Near Eastern context than in our ears today. We would probably equate the thoughts expressed there with something like, “a little birdie told me.” During the Persian period in particular, as the Greek historians Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*, 8.2.10) and Herodotus (*History* 1.114) relate, there was a network of government inform ants known as “the eyes and ears of the king.” (For these and other such references, see Seow, 341.)So be careful, Qohelet says, with whom you share negative thoughts about the king. Don’t even share them with your wife. Better yet, don’t even share them with yourself.

NOTE

20 Other translations have been offered for בְּמַדָּעֲךָ (*bᵉmaddāʿᵉkā*, “in your thoughts”). The word מַדָּע(*maddāʿ*) occurs only five other times in the OT, usually with the meaning “knowledge” (see, e.g., 2Ch 1:10 – 12 for three of the occurrences). By the changing of one or more consonants, various suggested emendations result in terms that are thought to be more in parallel with “bedroom” in the next line, such as “bedchamber” (so NASB),“couch,” “repose,” “acquaintance,” etc. All textual witnesses attest to the accuracy of the MT, however, and “thoughts” or “thinking” is a fair extrapolation from a term for “knowledge.”

15. Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control? (11:1 – 6)

OVERVIEW

If, as Qohelet has repeatedly said, the future is unknowable, what are the implications for business, investment, and labor?

1 Cast your bread upon the waters,
or after many days you will find it again.

2 Give portions to seven, yes to eight,
for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.

3 If clouds are full of water,
they pour rain upon the earth.
Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north,
in the place where it falls, there will it lie.

4 Whoever watches the wind will not plant;
whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

5 As you do not know the path of the wind,
or how the body is formed in a mother's womb,
so you cannot understand the work of God,
the Maker of all things.

6 Sow your seed in the morning,
and at evening let not your hands be idle,

for you do not know which will succeed,
whether this or that,
or whether both will do equally well.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 From ancient times these verses were understood as an encouragement to charitable giving; this became the traditional interpretation.In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a shift occurred to what became the dominant interpretation, namely, that the advice was to take risks with one's investments, perhaps even overseas, but also to diversify those investments. Of late more commentators have returned to the traditional interpretation.

The usual supports cited include one text from the same time period as Ecclesiastes, early Jewish and Chris tian interpretation of these verses, and similar-sounding proverbs from other cultures in the region. The Egyptian text Instruction of Ankhsheshonky, dated somewhere between the fifth and first centuries BC, has the lines, "Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it" (text in *AEL* , 3:174). Though the parallel is in some respects apparent, the "bread"metaphor is lacking; the text itself may date later than Ecclesiastes. The later proverbial similarities in other texts may have arisen from early Jewish and Chris tian interpretation. (Two reasoned arguments in favor of the traditional interpretation may be found in Fox, *Time to Tear Down*, 311 – 14 [with some qualifications]; Seow, 334 – 36, 341 – 44.)

The position adopted here is that the investment scenario best fits the context of the passage and the thought of Qohelet as a whole. Qohelet has thus far demonstrated no real concern for the poor.The phrase, "Send . . . upon the waters" (a better translation for *šallaḥ* than "cast"), has a parallel in Isaiah 18:2, which speaks of sending (same verb) boats on the water. In Proverbs 31:14, the virtuous woman "is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar" ("food" being *leḥem*, the same word as "bread" in Ecc 11:1). The advice, then, is to take some risks, especially regarding foreign investments, but "don't put all your eggs in one basket," since you don't know which of several disasters might occur.

The use of the numbers "seven . . . eight" is referred to as a "graded numerical saying," a poetic device, both in Hebrew and other ancient Near Eastern languages, in which the numbers are not to be taken literally or exclusively (see, e.g., Pr 6:16;30:15 – 33; Am 1 – 2; Mic 5:4). Notice that Qohelet's advice is, of course, directed to those who are fortunate enough to be in a position to invest.

3 – 4 It is possible that two of the disasters of which Qohelet speaks are given

in v.3. Clouds may well bring rain at the most inopportune time. A tree may fall, perhaps because of a heavy wind or storm and, depending on where it falls, cause no, little, or significant damage. Here, if indeed the tree falls because of a windstorm, it is possible that vv.3 – 4 together form a chiasm, with the two mentions of clouds (vv.3a and 4b) going together, and the tree (v.3b) and the wind (v.4a) going together.Whether or not the chiasm is intentional, the message is clearly that the contingencies, the possibilities of disaster, should not force one into a state of paralysis. Even as, in the light of life's absurdity, Qohelet has previously recommended laboring and taking pleasure in the fruits of one's labor over the alternative of doing nothing, here he recommends action over inaction in the face of the unknown contingent.

5 There are two different readings for the first half of the verse. Staying with the MT but supplying the conjunction "and" before "how bones" (*ka*ʿ*ăṣāmôṯ*; NIV, "how the body"), many commentators and translations, including both the NIV and NASB, understand that there are two separate anal-ogies: "the path of the wind" and "the body . . . in the womb."

But, without supplying the conjunction and by reading a different preposition on the noun *ba*ʿ*ăṣāmîm* ("in the bones"), one arrives at a different translation containing only one analogy: "as you do not know how the spirit comes into the bones in the mother's womb." The Hebrew letters *b* and *k* are similar (ב and כ) and easily confused, especially in older scripts. This is supported by a number of Hebrew manuscripts and would seem to be the better reading. Regardless, the point is clear: just as you cannot comprehend this analogy (or analogies), so you cannot possibly understand God's doings.The verse serves as a reinforcement of ignorance.

6 For the fourth time in this six-verse passage, Qohelet informs the reader, "you do not know."The human being's position is basically one of ignorance. So he advises activity in the morning and at night, without by any means leaving us to infer that the hours in between are to be idle ones. Maybe one of our activities will succeed, maybe the other. If we are extremely fortunate, maybe both will succeed. Qohelet doesn't mention the possibility that "neither" will succeed; either that goes without saying, or he intimates that certainly something ought to work.

The title I gave to this section is “Risk Management? Or Ignorance Control?” In the face of the absurdity of life, with all of its contingencies, Qohelet recommends a certain amount of risk, offshore investing, a diversified portfolio, and doing something rather than nothing. While there is a measure of soundness to his counsel, we shouldn’t be too eager to make Qohelet our primary financial advisor. The advice again betrays his class bias as well as his relative lack of concern for the poor and less fortunate (assuming the correctness of the interpretation above). All of his advice is born under a massive cloud of ignorance — it has no greater motivation.

But the Bible also speaks of another financial advisor, one who had no place to lay his head (Lk 9:58), who relied on a fish to supply him with tax money (Mt 17:27), and who advised his followers not to be too concerned about how they were going to survive financially, much less become “well-to-do.” Those who would follow his advice may be under just as much of a cloud of ignorance as those who would follow Qohelet. But somehow Jesus’ advice seems better.

NOTES

3 The last words of this verse, שָׁם יִהְיֶה (*šām yihyeʾ*, “there it is” [not “lies”]), are somewhat difficult. The יִהְיֶה (*yihyeʾ*) could be analyzed as the third person masculine singular of הָוָה (*hāwâ*, “to become”), with an א (*aleph*) substituting for a h (*heh*); such interchanges are more common in later biblical Hebrew. But the vocalization is not quite what one would expect. It seems better to understand that a י (*yod*) was accidentally inserted in the course of transmission and that the original reading was שָׁם הוּא (*šām huʾ*, “there it is”).

5 There is an interesting wordplay in v.5 in the use of the words רוּחַ (*rûaḥ*, “spirit”) and הַמְּלֵאָה (*hammelēʾâ*, “the full one,” i.e., “the pregnant one”). In the previous verses the concern was with the “wind” (רוּחַ, *rûaḥ*) and the clouds that were “full” (יִמָּלְאוּ, *yimmālʾû*) of rain. Two words previously used with reference to phenomena of weather are now used with reference to the mystery of human birth (Seow, 337, has most recently called attention to this use).

16. Some Questionable Advice for Youth (11:7 – 10)

OVERVIEW

These verses are part of a larger passage (11:7 – 12:7) dealing with youth, old age, and death.But it is convenient to look at the initial verses of the larger passage by themselves. While some commentators would separate out vv.7 – 8 as belonging to the previous section, for most commentators there seems to be a closer connection with what follows. Here Qohelet addresses a young man and gives advice that must be regarded as highly questionable.

7 Light is sweet,
and it pleases the eyes to see the sun.

8 However many years a man may live,
let him enjoy them all.
But let him remember the days of darkness,
for they will be many.
Everything to come is meaningless.

9 Be happy, young man, while you are young,
and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth.
Follow the ways of your heart
and whatever your eyes see,
but know that for all these things
God will bring you to judgment.

10 So then, banish anxiety from your heart
and cast off the troubles of your body,
for youth and vigor are meaningless.

COMMENTARY

7 Despite his earlier declaration in 6:5 that the unborn child who has not seen the sun is better off than those who are alive and beset by many troubles (cf. also 4:1 – 3), Qohelet here says that it is indeed both sweet and pleasant to see the sun and to enjoy its light. He never suggests that one should commit suicide — what Jerry Leiber in his song “Is That All There Is?” referred to as the “final disappointment.” Despite the fact that the moment will not last, Qohelet

recommends that one take pleasure, whenever possible, in life's sweetness.

8 But the dark cloud that has hung over the entire book shows up again and cannot be ignored.Whether those days in the sun be short or long, they are ephemeral, and the days of darkness that follow will be even longer, rendering absurd the whole enterprise of living. The exact referent for "days of darkness" is not certain. In 5:17 Qohelet referred to darkness as the current vexatious state of one's existence, but in 6:4 darkness represents death.It may be that by describing these days as "many,"Qohelet intends both nuances. The "days of darkness" refer primarily to death. But death, as it were, extends backwards and makes its evil felt even in the present, in the toil of life, and especially in the years of growing old, when it becomes much more difficult to see the light and to enjoy the sun.

9 Qohelet now addresses one young man in particular and advises him to enjoy life's pleasures while he is still young. If this had been all, it would have been no different from what had already been said in v.7. But the advice takes a pernicious turn with the encouragement to "follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see." Despite the unsupported (and frankly, unsupportable) declaration of some commentators that the advice is nothing more than to get all the innocent enjoyment out of life as possible, both the immediate context and the larger theology of the OT suggest exactly the opposite.

In Numbers 15:39, the warning from Moses to the people is to "remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes" (NASB).The only bad advice the prophet Nathan ever gave David was this:"Whatever you have in mind [lit., 'in your heart'], go ahead and do it" (2Sa 7:3); and that very night God appeared to Nathan and countermanded the advice. The consistent message of the OT is that one's heart may lead one astray, and one's eyes may yearn after the very thing that will bring about their owner's destruction. The heart and the eyes are unreliable guides.

In the more immediate context, Qohelet admits how dangerous his advice really is when he adds that God will bring into judgment those who follow it. This is not simply a statement that God will judge matters, but in fact that precisely "for all these things" (i.e., following one's own heart and eyes) God will bring the follower to court.

It is also important to note that the advice is directed toward one addressed as "young man." Unlike the frame-narrator, who will come in at the end and in typical wisdom fashion speak to "my son" in urging him to "fear God and keep his commandments" (12:12 – 13), Qohelet addresses a young man (any young man) and gives him leave to do the exact opposite, should his heart and eyes tell him to. Interestingly, they both call attention to God's judgment (11:9 and 12:14), but whereas the frame-narrator talks about God's bringing "every *deed* into judgment," Qohelet says that God will bring "*you* into judgment." Qohelet's warning is more ominous precisely because the foregoing advice has been so perverse.

10 Qohelet advises the young man to banish anxiety (*kaʿas*, "vexation") from his heart and to remove the troubles (*raʿa*, "evil") from his body. Of course, no one really has control over the anxiety that may work its way into one's mind or over the pain that may afflict one's body. They cannot simply be banished or removed; but they can, in a measure, be palliated, and that must be Qohelet's meaning here.

This palliation is accomplished by one's eating, drinking, living "the good life," and doing whatever the heart mandates and the eyes command. Of course, this is most easily done when one is young, so that is the time to do it. But remember, youth and vigor are *hebel* ("absurd"; GK 2039). Perhaps *hebel* in this passage primarily takes on the idea of "ephemeral," as even Fox (*Time to Tear Down* , 319), the primary advocate of the meaning "absurd,"allows. But Fox also notes, "At the same time, it connotes illusoriness and thus absurdity, because the brevity that makes it [youth and pleasure-seeking] precious also makes it deceptive; and what deceives the mind is absurd."

NOTE

10 שַׁחַר (*šaḥar*,"vigor") has been variously seen as either derived from or related to שַׁחַר (*šaḥar*, "dawn"), thus the dawn of youth or young adulthood, or from שַׁחַר (*šaḥar*, "black hair"), thus also the time of youth, when the hair has not yet begun to gray. Other suggested derivations have been made as well.

17. An Apocalyptic Death (12:1 – 7)

OVERVIEW

While it would be an exaggeration to say that there are as many different interpretations of this passage as there are commentators, it would at least be fair to say that there is no consensus on the interpretation. The disagreement among interpreters exists at three levels: (1) Should the passage be interpreted literally, symbolically, allegorically, or with a mixture of two of these approaches, or even all three? And whichever line of interpretation one chooses, is there any assurance that the author of the passage was himself consistent throughout; i.e.,could the author have shifted from literal to symbolic, to allegorical, back to literal, etc.? (2) Once one adopts the literal, symbolic, or allegorical interpretation, exactly what is the overall meaning of the passage within any one of these three rubrics?(3) Finally, what is the meaning of the individual clauses, phrases, and words (some of which occur in the Hebrew Bible only here)?

For example, if one opts for the literal, what exactly is the passage describing literally? Among the suggested answers are: (1) old age and death, (2) an approaching storm, (3) the onset of winter, (4) apocalyptic judgment, (5) a dirge, (6) a funeral, (7) war, (8) the deterioration of a house, or (9) the depopulation of a town. If one sees the passage as being primarily symbolic, exactly what is being symbolized, and how extensive is the symbolism?Does the rain stand in for tears? Does the darkening of the sun represent blindness? And if so, does the reference to how “those looking through the windows grow dim” represent the same thing? Do the grinders represent teeth? Are the almond tree blossoms representative of gray hair? Is the grasshopper a euphemism for the male sexual organ?Does the pitcher symbolically contain the water of life? For those who interpret the passage as an allegory, is it an allegory of the body growing old, or a corpse, or a town, or a kingdom?

In the end, one must make a choice. Though not opposed to allegorical interpretation, (indeed, I agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that, in some respects, allegorical interpretation “remains a splendid freedom of the church’s exegesis” [*No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 316]), I believe that, most likely, the author did not intend such here. It seems

best to take the passage literally, while recognizing that some of the literal elements readily lend themselves to a symbolic meaning, but not so as to become a full-blown allegory. Though some elements may be understood symbolically, they all contribute primarily to the literal meaning.

On the literal plane, then, the passage is a depiction of death and its attendant circumstances. More precisely, a man who has grown old in v.1 dies in v.2. Verses 3 – 5 describe the state of mourning that attends his death. Verses 6 – 7 depict the interment.This scenario basically follows the interpretation set out by Fox (*Time to Tear Down*, 319 – 49) and, in measure, by Seow (351 – 68, 372 – 82).

Three special aspects to this death must be noted.First, this is an apocalyptic death. It is accompanied by ominous clouds, the darkening of the light from the heavenly bodies, the dissolution of industry and commerce, and, depending on how v.5 is interpreted, the languishing of nature. The person who dies is important enough that business comes to a halt. Perhaps he is the owner of a large estate. Perhaps he is the king. Perhaps it is Qohelet himself. But the passage also lends itself to democratization. This is your death. As John Donne would remind you, the bell tolls for thee. And everyone's death is a mini-apocalypse. Each death is the end of the world.

Second, this passage is both a reflection and, in some cases, a reversal of the first so-called nature poem in 1:4 – 11. The sun that never rested in 1:5 now rests darkened forever in 12:2. The wind (*nâaḥ*, GK 8120) that went around endlessly (*sābab*, GK 6015) in circles in 1:6 finds its reflection in the spirit (*nâaḥ*, of humankind, which no longer goes around but returns to God in 12:7, and also in the mourners who "go about" (*sābab*, the streets in 12:5. The earth, which remains forever in 1:4, is the same earth that is now ready to receive back the dust (12:7) that it temporarily loaned out so that the man could have a body in which to live. If this passage is to be seen as reflective of Qohelet's own death, then he is the "generation" (1:4) that came and now has gone. It is only seen this way from the perspective of the one who dies, however. The next day the sun will shine again, and business will resume as usual.

Third, this passage is also a reversal of Qohelet's autobiographical sketch in 1:12 – 2:11. For Qohelet, the one who built houses for himself (2:4), his house

has now become a place of mourning (12:3). For the one who acquired slaves (2:7), now those slaves observe his death (12:3). For the one who amassed silver and gold (2:8), now the silver cord is severed and the golden bowl is broken (12:7). For the one who acquired female singers (2:8), now the "daughters of song" sing only faintly (12:4). For the one who made reservoirs of water (2:6), now the pitcher is shattered at the spring (12:6). And if we bring in 11:9 – 10 as part of this passage, then for the one who followed after his own heart and eyes in 2:1 – 11, God has indeed "for all these things" brought him to judgment (11:9). Qohelet has died — and you will too.

1 Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
"I find no pleasure in them" —

2 before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;

3 when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;

4 when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when men rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;

5 when men are afraid of heights
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms
and the grasshopper drags himself along
and desire no longer is stirred.
Then man goes to his eternal home
and mourners go about the streets.

6 Remember him — before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,

or the wheel broken at the well,

7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

COMMENTARY

1 Qohelet's encouragement to remember one's Creator while still young is put into a time frame.This is to be done "before" the "evil" רעה days come. What is not clear here is exactly how one is to remember the Creator, and for what reason.While it is possible that there may be a measure of piety in the statement, it seems more likely that the remembering is for the purpose of reminding oneself that the Creator will also one day be the De-creator, that the One who made you from the dust of the earth and breathed into you the breath of life (Ge 2:7) is the same One who will recall that life, return your body to the dust, and take back his breath (Ecc 12:6). So if you are going to follow Qohelet's advice to "follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see" (11:9), you had better be sure to do so while you're young — before God sends upon you the evil days, when it will be too late to take any pleasure in life.

2 Old age, which replaced youth in v.1, is now in turn replaced by death.To "see the sun" in Ecclesiastes (6:5; 7:11; 11:7) is to be alive. For the sun and its light plus the moon and stars to grow dark means for one to die. The clouds that return after the rain serve as an ominous portent of evil, for after it has rained the clouds should disappear. That they return is symbolic of an evil day from which there will be no escape. The evil day has come, the sun is not going to reappear, and there will be no reprieve. Death, if it has not already occurred, is imminent.

3 Four groups are mentioned in v.4. The attempts to allegorize the four have usually resulted in the following: "keepers" = arms, "strong men" = legs, "grinders" = teeth, "those looking through the windows" = eyes, and of course the house is the body as whole. While these identifications are certainly possible, and perhaps even intentionally suggestive as a kind of double entendre, they are better understood on the more literal level.

The "keepers" are the household servants, who are witnessing the death. The

“strong men” (*anšēḥelḥāyil*) are noblemen, the most important men in the community, whose bodies “writhe” or “are bent” (*šāwat*[NIV , “stoop”], the same word translated as “crooked” in 1:15 and 7:13) at the thought of another member of the nobility coming to the end of life.The “grinders” are either female household servants grinding meal for the estate,or women who are grinding at a community mill. They cease their work and gradually leave their positions to join those who are gathering together to mourn over the death that is about to occur or has already occurred. Those “looking through the windows”are noblewomen who, from a more respectable distance becoming of their societal position, see what they can see.

With regard to this last group, it is important to note the motif that occurs in the OT of the woman looking through the window (see Jdg 5:28; 2Sa 6:16; 2Ki 9:30; 1Ch 15:29; Pr 7:6). In all of these occurrences, the woman at the window is witness to a distressing scene. Here the scene is the death of a nobleman in the community. The women “grow dim” for sorrow (cf. La 5:17; same word). The whole community — menservants and noblemen, grinding maids and noblewomen — are affected by this death.

4 The doors to the street, most likely the street-market, are shut. Selling and buying have been put on hold. The mill has shut down operations. Jeremiah 25:10 refers to the cessation of sound from the millstones, along with the silencing of the voices of bride and bridegroom, as signs of ruin and destruction. Here an important member of the community has died or is rapidly nearing death. The business and industrial community stops to mourn. It has become so “deathly” quiet that the voices of birds arouse more attention than usual, perhaps as harbingers of evil. And the women in the community, who usually sing joyous songs, are now reduced to singing songs of mourning.

5 In what is probably the most difficult verse in this passage to interpret, there are also the most suggestive attempts at allegorization. In keeping with the belief that the passage is primarily about old age, the first two lines have generally been interpreted to say that old people are afraid of heights and of leaving their homes. The next three lines have been interpreted with the almond blossoms representing gray hair, the grasshopper symbolic of a failing male sex organ, and the “caperberry” (NASB, a more accurate rendering than the NIV) as an aphrodisiac that no longer has the desired effect. Rejecting this allegorical interpretation leaves a number of questions at the literal level.Who is the one

who is afraid, and what is it above that is feared? What are the dangers on the road? Are the last three lines to be interpreted positively or negatively? And is the grasshopper a grasshopper, a locust, or a locust plant?

The position taken here is that the terrors both on high and on the road are terrors that accompany the death of the important person in this passage.And if indeed this important person is the king, then one may compare Lamentations 4:20: “The LORD ’s anointed, our very life breath, was caught in their traps. We thought that under his shadow we would live among the nations.” It is significant that in the surrounding context are found some of the same images as are in Ecclesiastes 12:1 – 7: “Moreover, our eyes failed” (La 4:17), just as “those looking through the windows grow dim” (Ecc 12:3);“men stalked us at every step, so we could not walk in our streets” (La 4:18), just as there are “terrors on the road” (Ecc 12:5 NASB); “our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the sky” (La 4:19), just as there are terrors on high (Ecc 12:5).

The last three lines, having to do with the almond tree, the grasshopper, and the caperberry, have usually been taken as either wholly positive, i.e., nature goes on, apparently oblivious to the death that has occurred; or it has been taken as a mixture of positive and negative (usually positive for the almond and negative for the other two). It is best to understand all three images as negative. Against the traditional translation “blossoms,” which requires reading a different verb from the one actually indicated in the consonantal text, it is best to read “becomes revolting” (so Seow, 347, 361). In Jeremiah 1:11 — one of only three other occurrences of the word for “almond” (šāqēd) in the OT — a branch from an almond tree plays a figurative role in the forecast of divine judgment on Israel. It is possible, then, that the almond tree, as well as the two following images, are explicatory of the “terrors on the road.”In some way, the sight of the almond tree becomes a repulsive, foreboding sight as an accompaniment to the death of this man.

That the grasshopper, or perhaps better locust, is “laden” (better than “drags himself along”) is also portentous. In the light of other passages in which locusts are responsible for major devastation (e.g.,Ex 10:4, 12 – 15; Dt 28:38, 42; 2Ch 7:13; Ps 78:46;Joel 1:4; 2:1 – 11, 25), the sight of an overstuffed locust constitutes another harbinger of evil. That the caperberry “fails” or “breaks covenant” may simply mean that it has failed to produce fruit, perhaps after promising to do so with its flowers; it thus becomes another sign of terror, an

attendant circumstance to the death of the king.

While Michael Fox sees all of vv.3 – 5 as pertaining to the funeral, it would appear rather that the description of the things that have happened pertain to the day of death, and that only when we arrive at the end of v.5 does the funeral actually come into play. The corpse is now carried to its eternal home, a euphemism for the grave, and mourners join in the funeral procession.

6 The most likely understanding of v.6 is that we have here a series of actions that take place at the funeral or interment. Seow, 366 – 67, 381 – 82, calls attention to abundant archaeological evidence from sealed graves yielding lamps and broken pottery, which could have only been broken before being put in the grave (see also his "Qoheleth's Eschatological Poem," *JBL* 118 [1999]: 230 – 33).

It is unclear whether the "silver cord" and "golden bowl" should be understood as connected.The usual understanding is that the bowl is suspended from the cord, which when severed causes the bowl to break. Seow, 364 – 66, has argued that in this particular instance "cord" is better translated as "tendril" or "branch," as of a lampstand, the bowl's purpose consisting in holding the oil for the lamp-stand. Though this is a reasonable understanding, it is impossible to be certain of its correctness.

While the translation for "pitcher" seems definite, there is uncertainty with regard to the "wheel";several have argued that it refers to some other kind of pottery. The word for "well" or "cistern" (בּוֹר, GK 1014) can also be translated as "pit," a word used often in the OT to refer to the grave. It is reasonable to understand here a funerary ritual during which various items seen as symbolic of life were shattered to symbolize the end of life and then placed in the grave.

7 The body is returned to the earth, and the spirit, the "breath" of life, is returned to God, the Creator, who gave it. There is no hint here of any belief in a life beyond the grave. This is not simply the end; it is the absolute end. The earth has reclaimed its dust. God has reclaimed his spirit.

NOTES

1 "Your creator," the MT's בּוֹרְאֶיךָ (*bôr'eykā*), seems troublesome for many commentators because the noun is plural and because a reference to the Creator seems out of place. Instead they read the noun as בּוֹר (*bôr*, "pit"; GK 1014), translated "well" or "grave" in v.6; or they read it metaphorically as a reference to one's wife, as the word is used in Proverbs 5:15.The plural is probably a plural of majesty, however, and the references to God in 11:9 and 12:7 do not really make the reference here seem all that out of place. The MT probably has the correct reading, but it is possible that the author may have wanted the reader also to pick up on the homonymic possibilities for a wordplay.

5 Though the Masoretic notes favor removing the aleph (א) from וְיֵאָץ (*wᵉyēʾāṣ*) to form the verb וְיֵצֵץ (*wᵉyēṣēṣ*), from נָצַץ (*nāṣaṣ*, "to blossom"), I favor, with Seow, keeping the consonantal text as it is and pointing it וְיֵאָץ (*wᵉyaʾᵃṣ*), Hiphil of נָאַץ [*nāʾaṣ*, "to cause one to revile/be repulsed"]). Alternatively, it could be pointed as the Niphal וְיֵאָץ (*wᵉyinnāʾēṣ*, "to be disdained, reviled"). Seow suggests that a wordplay could also be involved. One looks expecting blossoms but instead finds something repulsive.

"Grasshopper" is חָגָב (*ḥāgāb*), a variety of locust; this word occurs only four other times in the OT. Because it occurs here between the mention of two plants, some suggest that it should probably be seen as referring not to the insect but to the locust plant. If so, the passage could mean that, as Seow, 362, suggests, "the dead locust tree droops — from the weight of the pods." While this is certainly possible, it seems that the interpretation given in the exposition above fits better with the idea that the images are reflective of terrors on or by the road.

תָּפֵר (*tāpēr*, from the root פָּרַר [*pārar*], most often used in the OT for someone violating a covenant or other such pledge) may appear to be a strange word to use with regard to the caperberry's failure to produce fruit. But there is a similar floral parallel in Isaiah 40:6, where a covenantal term is used with regard to how humans are like grass, and all of their חֶסֶד (*ḥesed*, "faithfulness, loyalty"; GK 2876; NRSV, "constancy") is like the flowers of the field.

6 The Hebrew verb translated "severed" (NIV) is problematic. The MT's *Kethib* has some form of the verb נָתַק (*nāṯaq*, "to be distant, to be removed"), while the *Qere* assumes the verb is from נָתַק (*nāṯaq*, The only other biblical occurrence of

nātaq is Nahum 3:10, where in the Pual it means “to be bound” (though Seow, 365, argues that the verb in later Aramaic means “to knock, crush”); the *Qere* is actually the textual reading in some forty Hebrew manuscripts. Many scholars emend the text so that the verb comes from רָסַק (*nāḥaq*, “to tear, snap”). This verb’s subject, the “silver cord,” is ambiguous and eludes any certainty of identification.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what is the גַּלְגַּל (*galgal*, “wheel”). The usual assumption is that it is a wheel for the pulley at the “well” (*bôr*, GK 1014). But if (*bôr*, is translated rather as “pit” or “grave,” this necessity no longer obtains. It seems more likely, as Seow, 367, argues, that it appears in parallelism with the word for “pitcher” in the previous line and thus designates some other vessel of pottery. It also possibly has some relationship with the word for “bowl,” גֻּלַּת (*gullat*), two lines before. In fact, Seow suggests that the word be repointed as גֹּלְגַּל (*golgal*), which puts it in close relationship not only to *gullat* but also, interestingly, to גֻּלְגֹּלֶת (*gulgōlet*), “skull” = NT “Golgotha.”

III. EPILOGUE: QOHELET WAS WISE — BUT (12:8 – 14)

OVERVIEW

Qohelet’s words are completed. The frame-narrator now reenters, summarizes Qohelet’s thought, gives an evaluation, talks about the words of the wise, and brings the whole business to a conclusion. Though most commentators see these verses as coming from two or more different hands, it is best, along with Fox and Longman, to understand that the epilogue is the work of the frame-narrator, who is in fact the author of the book (see Authorship in the introduction).

8 “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher.
“Everything is meaningless!”

9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

11 The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings ike firmly embedded nails — given by one Shepherd. 12Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them.Of making many books there is no end, and much study wearies the body.

13 Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the whole duty of man.

14 For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.

COMMENTARY

8 As the narrator began his summary of Qohelet's thought (1:2), so he now brackets Qohelet's speech with basically the same words, except that mercifully he writes *hebel* ("absurd") only three times instead of five. It is important to note here that the narrator does not choose one of the so-called *carpe diem* phrases to introduce and conclude Qohelet's thought, but rather aptly summarizes his created character's philosophy with the words for which the book of Ecclesiastes is best known.

If Qohelet truly were a "preacher of joy," it would seem that the narrator would have chosen one of his more "upbeat" statements to summarize the message. But that would have gone against Qohelet's own teaching; for Qohelet said that *everything* is *hebel*, and if *everything* truly is *hebel*, then there is nothing more to say (see Notes). But the narrator finds more to say, for in spite of what his created character asserts, the narrator cannot quite bring himself to believe that truly *everything* is *hebel*.

9 The first word, *yōtēr*, is not to be translated as the NIV ("not only") and NASB ("in addition to")have it, rather, as the conjunction "furthermore" or "moreover" (see Fox, *Time to Tear Down* , 350 – 51;Longman, 277; Anton Schoors, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth*

[OLA 41; Leuven: Peeters, 1992], 115).So the first assertion is that Qohelet was a sage. It may seem strange that the narrator feels the need to communicate this information to us, but it must be remembered that the only official information we have as to Qohelet's occupational status is that he was a king.

The use of another intensifying conjunction, "also" (ʿôd), in the next clause suggests that teaching the "people" (apparently larger and more diverse groups than just those being trained as courtiers) was not necessarily the understood role of every sage, but certainly it was the role of a king-sage. While "pondered" or "weighed" is a possible translation for ,ʾizzēn (seen as a derivative of mōʾznayim, "scales"), it would be the only such occurrence of this word in the OT. It is just as likely, if not more so, that it should be seen as a form of the verb ,ʾāzan, "to hear," with hearing (i.e., listening to what had been said before) being perhaps the first responsibility of every sage.

He also "searched out," a term used in Proverbs 25:2 with reference to what kings do:"to search out a matter is the glory of kings." While the "set[ting] in order" (tiqqēn; GK 9545) of proverbs may include, as Fox suggests, the composition of proverbs (*Time to Tear Down*, 349, 352),"set in order" more likely refers to the collecting and arranging of them — something that Solomon probably did and that Hezekiah and his men certainly did (Pr 25:1). Michael Fishbane argues that it is in fact a technical term for editorial activity (*Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* , 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1988], 32).

While Fishbane may be correct, Fox's caution against taking the terms in this verse as necessarily technical is also valid. It is interesting that the verb (tiqqēn) has been used twice before in Ecclesiastes (in 1:15 and 7:13) to refer to the impossibility of "straightening out" what has been made (or what God has made) crooked. Does its use here suggest that Qohelet tried to "straighten" proverbs, i.e., correct idealistic sayings so that they better conform to reality (see Perry, 172)?

10 Qohelet sought to find words of "delight" (ḥēpeṣ; cf. NASB). His success in the quest may be gauged by his own statements to the effect that he never found what he was looking for (cf. 7:28; 8:17). The exact meaning of the second half of the verse is debated. Unlike many commentators and translations, it is preferable here to translate more along the lines of the NASB, that he sought "*to*

write”rather than that “he wrote” (NRSV) or “what was written” (NIV). In other words, the last line should be seen as related to what Qohelet “sought” to do rather than as a statement of what he actually accomplished. The narrator remains noncommittal with regard to the success of Qohelet’s venture (see Notes).

11 The narrator uses examples of what were apparently herding tools to describe the teachings of the sages. They are like “goads” and “firmly embedded nails.” While the sharpness of these objects is certainly in view here, emphasis should also be given to the “firmly embedded” or “well-driven”aspect. In the only other occurrence in the OT of the word for “goad” (*dorbān*), in 1 Samu el 13:21, it is noted that the goad was “set.” In that verse the NIV has “repoint,” and other translations understand “sharpen,” but the verb is *nāṣab*, which always means to “station, set up, establish, set firm.” Thus it would seem that here the point (pun intended) of the verse is that not only are these sayings sharp, but they are also firmly established, i.e., they are entrenched in the tradition.

But Qohelet’s activity, while certainly to be seen within the wisdom tradition, has nevertheless done something to loosen the firmness of the goads and nails. The frame-narrator is, in measure here, settling in between his created character Qohelet and the tradition for which he still has great regard.

There is considerable discussion as to the identity of the “one Shepherd.” Both the NIV and NASB, by their capitalization, clearly indicate that the shepherd is God; and this has been the traditional interpretation. More recently, most scholars seem to have adopted the position that the phrase is simply a continuation of the metaphor begun with “goads” and “nails” and that the “one” should be treated here, as is certainly many times the case, as an indefinite article, thus resulting in the simple translation,“a shepherd.” I believe, however, that the “one shepherd” refers rather to the (or “a”) king.

Martin Shields (“Ecclesiastes and the End of Wisdom,” *TynBul* 50 [1999]: 132 – 33) and Nicholas Perrin (“Messianism in the Narrative Frame of Ecclesiastes?” *RB* 108 (2001): 51 – 57) have pointed out that the only other places in the Hebrew Bible where the term “one shepherd” appears are Ezekiel 34:32 and 37:24, where in both cases it refers to the Davidic Messiah. I believe it is highly plausible that the “one king” of Ezekiel 34 and 37 also stands behind the use of

the identical phrase in Ecclesiastes 12:11 and that the phrase may have even become a technical term in reference to the king (or perhaps, the “Davidic Messiah”).

The import, then, of 12:11 is to indicate that the previously mentioned activities (searching, teaching, writing), products (words, sayings, goads, nails), and offices (the “masters of collections”; cf. NASB) are in fact state-sponsored, royally sponsored activities, products, and offices. They are “given” by the king. The activity of the sages, their writings, and even their positions exist because of, and in the service of, the throne. Qohelet is the chief sage, i.e.,the king, and the work of the sages who serve in his royal court should be seen as an extension of the king’s own sagacity. (For further support, see Shepherd, “Identity of Qohelet.”) This sets the stage for the more explicit criticism to follow.

12 As Fox (*Time to Tear Down* , 356 – 57) and Longman (280 – 81) argue, the opening phrase should be translated, “Furthermore, of these things, my son, be warned,” not “in addition to them”(NIV). The warning does not mean to be cautious about words in addition to those of Qohelet and the other wisdom writers, but to be cautious of Qohelet’s *own* words and the wisdom writings as a whole. Because such words are, in fact, the product of royally sponsored activities and because power corrupts, they are capable of being used in the wrong way — even in the service of oppression.Qohelet himself warned that a wise man can turn into a fool (7:7). Solomon himself, though great in wisdom, yet had his heart turned toward foolishness. Hezekiah — the other bookend, as it were, of the royal wisdom tradition in Israel — though himself wise, also had his heart turned toward foolishness. Now the frame-narrator gives a caution as to the extent to which their writings, their collections, their accumulated wisdom, can actually be used.

It should also be noted here that the narrator addresses this caution to someone he calls “my son.”Whether this is actually a biological son, a student, or simply a literary way of addressing the implied reader of the book, note that this form of address, so common in Proverbs, never occurs in the words of Qohelet. The closest he comes to it is in 11:9, where he tells the “young man” to follow the ways of his heart and eyes — advice in direct contradiction to the way of the Torah.

It is interesting that Solomon's and Hezekiah's successor-sons, Rehoboam and Manasseh, are the two kings who, according to the books of Kings, are respectively responsible first for the division of Israel's united monarchy into two separate kingdoms, and some three hundred years later for the ruin of the southern kingdom of Judah. Solomon's and Hezekiah's wisdom did them no good in teaching their own sons how to rule. Now the narrator is expressing a certain amount of caution with regard to adherence too closely to their accumulated wisdom. A more precise reason will be given in v.13.

The second line indicates that books can be multiplied endlessly and that excessive study (meditation? talking? see Notes) is wearying to the body. "Making many books" may refer to the student's copying down of the wisdom books he is studying. "Study" would be the time spent trying to understand these writings. In light of the foregoing, the implication seems to be that there is a better way in which "my son" can spend his time, or at least that, after a while, such study offers only diminishing returns.

13 Abruptly, the narrator brings the whole to a conclusion. Enough said! Here's what's important: "Fear God and keep his commandments." Those who think that in some way the narrator is here summarizing Qohelet's thought can do so only by glossing over what Qohelet has actually said. Qohelet has never told his readers to keep the commandments; if anything, he has done the opposite (see 7:16; 11:9). While he has encouraged the fear of God (3:14; 5:7; 8:12), the exposition above has shown that his fear is in fact only "terror" before the One who is stronger, and that whatever his piety may be, it is unmixed with anything like heartfelt devotion.

The narrator says that this fear of God and keeping of his commandments is *kol-hāʾādām,* "all of the man." This is the entirety of humanity's existence. Here is an "everything," an "all," that is not a *hebel* . Throughout the entire book, Qohelet has searched for something under the sun that is not meaningless, something that is not absurd. The narrator says that Qohelet never found it because he never looked in the right place. It cannot be found by empirical investigation, by observation of nature, or by studying the accumulated "wisdom of the ages and the sages." It is found in God and in his revealed Torah.

It was the king's responsibility to teach the people the law of God, or at least

to make sure that it was taught (Dt 17:18 – 20; 31:9 – 13; cf. 2Ki 23:1 – 3; 2Ch 34:29 – 32). Solomon and Hezekiah both did this in measure (see 1Ki 8:54 – 61; 2Ch 29:3 – 11; 30:6 – 12). But for the narrator, the Davidic dynasty failed in this mission on account of its excessive excursion into, and use of, the larger body of wisdom material in the ancient Near East.The formula for the people to be truly wise had already been given in Deuteronomy 4:5 – 6:

> See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your *wisdom* and *understanding* to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a *wise* and *understanding* people." (italics added)

Qohelet, the composite character representative of the Davidic dynasty, only partially succeeded in this task and unfortunately mixed godly Torah with worldly wisdom. Perhaps the narrator would not have formulated it in this way, but the book cries out for another Qohelet, another King-Sage to come whose teaching will conform to revelation, who will speak only what he hears from God (Jn 8:28), who is greater than Solomon (Mt 12:42) — indeed, one who is the very personification of wisdom (1Co 1:24, 30).

14 The narrator concludes by forcefully stating something else about which Qohelet was ambivalent. There will be a judgment that will include everything that is now hidden and unknown. Surely the narrator is no less observant than Qohelet and certainly knows as well as Qohelet that wicked people live to be old and that righ teous people die young. For him to make this statement so forcefully at the end of this book suggests a belief in an accounting that must take place beyond the grave and beyond this life.

But there is much for which he could not have hoped. Indeed, there will be a time when the only truly wise and righ teous judge will come and right all wrongs, correct all injustices, and redeem us from the absurdity of this life (Ro 8:20 – 21), because he himself was not spared from suffering that very absurdity (8:32). He will bring us into the glorious freedom of the children of God (8:21), and when he comes, the absurdity of death will not be able to separate us from his love (8:38) or from the One who himself is "the resurrection and the life"(Jn 11:25).

As the writing of this commentary comes to a close, it is Christmastime, and I

am listening to “O Come, O Come, Immanuel,” that song built on what the church of the Middle Ages referred to as the Great “O” Antiphons of Advent. One of the verses, built on the antiphon that begins “O Sapientia,” fittingly serves as a conclusion to this study:

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high
And order all things, far and nigh.
To us the path of knowledge show
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice, Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

NOTES

8 John Jarick has recently pointed out that it is only the least stroke of a pen, a tittle, that separates the words הכל and הכל (*hakkol* and *hebel*) , “the whole” and “absurd.” Jarick writes, “In the twinkling of an eye, with a deft sleight-of-hand, ‘everything’ has been changed into ‘nothing.’ And that is what Koheleth has done: הכל is הכל, he tells us, and in fact הכל הבלtells us everything we need to know about life and the universe from his perspective” (“The Hebrew Book of Changes: Reflections on *hakkōl hebel* and *lakkōl ʿāmāl* in Ecclesiastes,” *JSOT* 90 [2000]: 79 – 80). Later he refers to this phrase as the “most compact form of parallelism to be found in the Bible” (81).

10 The problem in this verse is how to understand כְּתוּב (*kātûb*) As pointed by the Masoretes it is a Qal passive participle. But the passive participle is awkward here, and most modern commentators repoint as an infinitive absolute, כָּתוֹב (*kātôb*). The question then becomes how this infinitive absolute should be understood. Some commentators regard it as parallel to “sought” and thus translate it in the indicative,“he wrote.” I prefer, however, along with Longman, 277 – 78, and Fox in his earlier article (“Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 [1977]: 96 – 97, though he has subsequently reversed his position in his two commentaries), to take the infinitive absolute as being in coordination with “to find” and in subordination to “sought.” That is, the infinitive absolute along with the infinitive construct “to find” constitute a compound direct object for “he sought.”

This construction makes sense grammatically and syntactically for two reasons. First, the infinitive absolute can assume the function of any other verbal form, including the infinitive construct (as in 1Sa 22:13; 25:26, 33; Jer 44:17; Eze 36:3; see Paul Joulon, *Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka [2 vols.; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991], §123x, 2:431). In this verse it seems more likely that the infinitive absolute would take on the function of the form that precedes it (and is more immediate), in this case the infinitive construct. Second, that the infinitive absolute can serve as the object of another verb is attested elsewhere (Dt 28:56; Job 9:18; 13:3; Isa 1:17; 7:16; 42:24; 57:20; see Joulon-Muraoka, *Grammar*, §123b, 2:420 – 21). It seems best, then, to understand the infinitive absolute here acting as the infinitive construct.

12 The exact derivation and nuance of לֹהַג (*lahag*, “study”) is not clear. It is variously explained as either a noun meaning “dedication” or “study,” or perhaps as a somewhat corrupted form of the infinitive construct for הָגָה (*hāgâ*; “to read, meditate, talk,” etc.). In either case the general meaning seems to be that, whatever it refers to, an excessive amount of it is not wise.

SONG OF SONGS

GEORGE M. SCHWAB

Introduction

1. First Impressions
2. History of Interpretation
3. Authorship and Date
4. Purpose and Canonicity
5. Bibliography
6. Outline

1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When a newcomer reads the Song of Songs, he or she is confronted with a jumble of images that seem to run together or suddenly shift with no rhyme or reason. One may ask, “When does one section end and another begin? Is there a story being told, and if so, who are the characters and what is the plot?” Without an answer to these questions, the book is confusing and enigmatic.

To many, the Song of Songs remains a closed book. They can discover little practical value in its eight chapters. The book does not speak of God, the law, or the history of Israel. Paul claims that all Scripture is profitable for reproof, correction, and training in righteous ness (2Ti 3:16 – 17) — but how can this be true of the Song of Songs? To what does it call the church? If the subject matter is human love and sexuality, why is there no mention of procreation? Why is there no clear moral prohibition of extramarital relations? Where is the girl’s father?

We who are Chris tians believe that Jesus Christ fulfills the OT (Mt 5:17; Lk 24:27; 2Co 1:20); however, the Song does not seem to be interested in matters of salvation. How does this book point to Christ? It is commonly asserted that the Song is an allegory of the relationship between Christ and his church, but the Song does not read like an allegory. In it, the girl seems to be the more aggressive character — for example, running out in the streets to pursue the boy. In that episode, what (if anything) is being said about Christ and the church? Are we ready to read 5:10 – 16 as a description of Jesus? Is this the best that we can

do to find Chris tian meaning in this book of the Bible?

Students of the Song of Songs have wrestled with these questions for millennia. Various answers have been advanced, and many of these are still endorsed today. Contemporary approaches include allegorical, dramatic, liturgical, and lyrical interpretations. For this reason, it is necessary to review briefly how the Song of Songs has been read through the centuries and to define the distinctive approach of the present work.

2. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

A Song of Love

The earliest evidence for how the Song was understood can be found in the Old Greek translation. If the Old Greek translators were allegorists, they exhibited remarkable restraint in how they rendered this book. Almost every word is rather woodenly translated. The only possible exceptions to this rule involve the translation of a name (*mānā, 4:8) and a few other glosses of difficult words. Even in those cases, the translation is justifiable according to the “literal” sense.

As has often been noted, if the Song had been discovered outside of its canonical context, it would be categorized as an ancient love song. In fact, a number of love songs have been discovered that bear striking similarity to the Song of Songs but that predate Solomon by many centuries. These share generic characteristics with this biblical song and as such are evidence that it was read in antiquity as a love song. In *t. Sanh.* 101a, Rabbi ʿAqiba (c. AD 100) is reported to denounce the practice of singing the Song in banquet halls! We may conclude that in the time of Christ the Song of Songs was read literally, as a celebration of human love.

Allegory of Spiritual Things

Early in the history of the church, however, we find the literal sense set aside in favor of allegory. The justification for this may be tied to the metaphor of God and Israel as husband and wife in the OT prophets. Psalm 45 is also a love song and shows many similarities to the Song of Songs — and the king of Psalm 45 is explicitly identified with Christ in Hebrews 1:8. The Old Greek consistently translates one word for sexual love in the Song as agapē, a word that takes on a significantly different meaning in the NT.Thus it was possible for an interpreter to find ways to derive fresh meanings.

It is a common misunderstanding that the Song was allegorized because of its sexual character. One may falsely imagine that the celibate Christians of antiquity reinvented the Song of Songs rather than heeded its celebration of sexuality. The truth of the matter is that all Scripture was subject to allegory.

In his *Peri Archōn*, Origen sets forth his belief that God has encoded Scripture with meaning, that every word of the Bible has hidden divine purpose (with God's purposes sometimes not being clearly revealed to the casual observer). If every text is true and meaningful, it follows that some enriching and significant truth can be found by a competent expositor. The more the text seems inaccurate, carnal, or unworthy of God, the more ingenuity is required to unlock its true meaning. For example, Leviticus describes six kinds of leprosy. What can an expositor do with this that would be of benefit to the Christian? Origen considered this interesting only insofar as it allegorically pointed to six sins that beset believers.

The early church expected rich and profound truth in every word of the Bible. It is out of the desire for the text to be relevant and doctrinally pure that allegory was born. Thus Origen found in an allegorical reading of the Song much that spoke of Christ. It is Christ, says Origen, standing behind the wall of the house of the OT before revealing himself to the church (2:9). "Your eyes are doves" (4:2) means that the girl can perceive hidden truths in Scripture. The cedar beams of their houses (1:17) are the bishops of the church. When the Song says, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2), it is really speaking of Christ pouring words of wisdom into the mouth of the believer. The entire Song of Songs was understood as a symbolic reflection on the rich, palatable, and ardent love between the resurrected Christ and his church and the love of the

Chris tian soul for this Lord. But it was the invented allegory, not the text, that spoke so clearly of Jesus.

The use of the Song as a springboard to allegory characterized the ancient church's hermeneutics and carried through to the medieval world; it was read almost exclusively as an allegory up until the last century. This can be seen in the medieval era in the writings of Gregory of Narek (tenth century AD) and Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century AD). Martin Luther read the Song as a symbolic expression of Solomon's experiences as king of Israel. To Luther, "let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1:2) depicts the love between God and the people under King Solomon. "The king has brought me into his chambers" (1:4) signifies how God comforted the king because of the evils he faced in government.

Luther's method of reading the Song as a code that points beyond itself to a completely different subject is almost indistinguishable from that of medieval interpreters. John Cotton's exposition of the Song (c. 1620) was "among his most millennial."[1]Though the Song makes no direct mention of the church, Christ, or (perhaps) even God, it became an important theological text in the Antinomian Crisis in New England (1636 – 37).[2]In the twentieth century, the allegorical approach to the Song is still alive and well.[3]

Though no two allegorists interpret the Song in the same way, they do share one perspective — their inspiration comes from the Scripture as a whole. The subject matter of their expositions is provided by the Song's canonical context itself (rather than the text of the Song). In contrast, the modern approaches are characterized by attempts to understand the Song of Songs in different contexts, not only that of the Bible.

The Song in Various Contexts

Drama. Franz Delitzsch called eighteen hundred years of allegory "numberless absurdities."[4]By the close of the nineteenth century, the Song was read in the generic context of love drama: a romance with a beginning, middle, and end. Delitzsch presented the most popular two-character dramatic analysis

of the Song, which he divided into six acts of two scenes each.

In a different interpretation, the three-character drama hypothesis, Solomon tries to woo the girl away from her true love, the simple shepherd. Three-character dramatists such as S. R. Driver criticized the two-character drama hypothesis (in which the boy and girl declare their mutual love) as "nothing but mutual declarations of admiration"[5] without ethical consequence. As no two allegorists interpreted the Song alike, so dramatists could not agree as to the plot, act and scene divisions, or number and identity of characters.If read as a secular love drama, the Song of Songs is a closed book. Nevertheless, throughout the twentieth century many commentaries and translations of the Song have tried to impose a logical progression on it with more or less success. The rubric "Chorus" for some sections of the Song echoes the dramatic approach reflected in a number of Bible translations today.

Syrian wedding ceremony. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the Song of Songs was commonly read in the generic context of Syrian wedding songs. Delitzsch's commentary recites a Syrian wedding song that bears notable likeness to the Song.[6]In the light of this material, the Song seemed to be a traditional part of an ancient wedding ceremony.[7]

The Syrian wedding songs that have so much in common with the Song are still in use in the twentieth century. It is unclear whether this material existed in the ancient world and genuinely sheds light on the original setting of the Song of Songs. Since the early part of the twentieth century, the Song has been placed in other contexts that are much closer to its ancient Near Eastern heritage.

The fertility cult. Babylonian and Canaanite fertility ritual have provided two other contexts within which the Song has been understood. Pope advanced the fertility cult hypothesis by reading the Song in the light of the *marzēaḥ* feast.[8]In these contexts, the Song appears to echo a liturgical past. The religious character of this material was advanced as an answer to the question of the Song's inclusion in the sacred text of the Bible. By placing the Song in a context other than the Bible, the liturgical theorists are able, paradoxically, to use its canonical context as evidence for their theory! Read in these patently religious contexts, the Song is thought to enshrine practices of Israel's idolatrous past by speaking of divine love rather than human love.

But the Song is clearly not religious in character. No deity is named, and the theory requires that later scribes excised whatever significant liturgical components ever existed.[9]Thus, despite similarities in genre, the evidence for the Song's origin as rooted in the fertility cult seems forced in comparison to another context — Egyptian love lyrics.

Egyptian love lyrics. In the twentieth century, ancient Egyptian love songs (1300 – 1100 BC) have provided the most successful context for the Song.[10] In the light of the Egyptian material, the Song can be read as an anthology of compositions that are secular and treat human (not divine) love — a collection of shorter songs, with no progression or plot in the dramatic sense, somewhat like the Psalter. It is unnecessary to assume (as the fertility-cult theorists must) an original usage obscured over time by Yahwistic scribes.In the generic context of the Egyptian material, the Song appears as a collection of loosely connected, individual love poems.

The following are selections from Egyptian love lyrics.

I am yours like the field
planted with flowers
and with all sorts of fragrant plants. . .
Pleasant is the canal within it
which your hand scooped out,
while we cooled ourselves in the north wind:
a lovely place for strolling about
with your hand upon mine!
My body is satisfied
and my heart rejoices
in our walking about together.
To hear your voice is pomegranate wine (to me):
I draw life from hearing it.
Could I see you with every glance,
it would be better for me
than to eat or drink.[11]
"Come, spend time where the young people are:
the meadow celebrates its day.

Under me are a festival booth and a hut,
and my rulers are happy and rejoice at seeing you.
Have your servants sent before you
fitted out with their vessels.
One grows intoxicated just hurrying to me
even before having taken a drink!
Your attendants have come
bearing their supplies.
They've brought beer of all sorts,
and bread of all types,
plants aplenty from yesterday and today,
and fruits of all kinds for delight.
Come spend the day in pleasure,
(one) morning, then another — two days,
sitting in (my) shade."
"Her friend is at her right
as she gets him intoxicated
and does whatever he says.
The beer hut is disarrayed from drink,
But she has remained with her brother."[12]

The poems quoted above contain many points of contact with the Song of Songs. The outdoor imagery, including fields, flowers, and fragrant plants, is reminiscent of 1:13 – 2:3. The girl sits in the boy's shade, his fruit is delightful, and the "beer-hut" where he is "at her right" bears remarkable likeness to 2:4 – 6. Like the Song, the Egyptian material has few references to the gods. In many ways, the love lyrics of Egypt seem to be cut from the same generic cloth as the Song of Songs: anthologies of love songs in various pastoral and urban settings. Each song presents the reader with a different perspective on its subject matter — love between a young man and woman.

The present work will approach the Song as a collection of individual love songs that treat human love and are not intended to add up to a story. Its overall design is not seen as one of plot and progression but of artistic composition with a view to emphasizing certain aspects of love. It is most likely that this perspective has gone full circle to the way that the vignettes in the Song were regarded from the time of Solomon until Jesus' day.

3. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

Along with other Wisdom literature books in the Bible, the Song presents aspects that seem late and others that seem early. Aspects that appear early may include the Song's mention of choice spices from India, its use of שׁ in place of ש, [13]the Solomonic-era Jerusalem of the Song,[14]its affinity with Bronze Age Canaanite texts, the lack of any Greek loanwords, and its similarity to Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts that date to well before Solomon's time. The mention of Solomon in the title will be discussed in some detail below.

Aspects that appear late include the absence of the Song's distinctive terminology in Solomonic texts,[15]Hebrew that is either dialectical or late, and the presence of Persian loanwords. Dates have been proposed that range from Solomon's era to the third century BC. The Song embodies forms that predate Solomon and achieved its final recension some time before the translation of the Old Greek; it preserves ancient love songs while bearing the stamp of later scribal activity.

Solomon is credited in the Bible for composing 3,000 proverbs and 1,005 songs (1Ki 4:32). Many of these were collected in the book of Proverbs, but a number were not added to the book until the days of Hezekiah (Pr 25:1). Similarly, even if the title of the Song of songs ascribes authorship to Solomon, it is unnecessary to assume that Solomon is responsible for its final form. Linguistic considerations witness to continuing development through the Exile. The individual songs, however, share generic traits with Egyptian material extant in Solomon's lifetime. After Solomon, there was little intercourse between Israel and Egypt until the time of Josiah. Solomon is named seven times in the Song. It would seem that there is a good case for authorship in the Solomonic era of some or all of the individual songs in some early form.

Nevertheless, Solomon is not really a character in any part of the Song. He stands in the distance, aloof, seen from afar; perhaps he is also the unnamed king mentioned in some lyrics. Several times the harem is negatively compared to the love relationship that the Song commends. It is as though the song was written with Solomon as a foil — sometimes about him, sometimes describing life in his kingdom. If this is the case, then the Song could have been written at any time when Solomon was regarded as a great king.

Unlike allegory (where much is made of Solomon's name, *šal*m*ôm* = [prince of] peace) and drama (where the lecherous historical Solomon tempts a girl with worldly splendor), reading the Song as an anthology of love lyrics requires no knowledge of either the author or the specific historical setting. Each vignette speaks to the human experience of love, and all who read may enter therein to taste and savor its sweet and bitter fruits.

4. PURPOSE AND CANONICITY

To those who argue that the Song is an allegory of spiritual truths — and was always intended to be read so — it belongs in the Bible because of its spiritual subject matter. George Noyes (1798 – 1868) is a typical example of those who rejected the allegorical approach and thus wondered whether "perhaps it might have been expedient to pass it by in significant and prudent silence."[16]Without a religious meaning, it was questioned whether it should have been included at all. But if the Song was once sung at weddings, then historically it may have been included in the Bible because of its close association with this aspect of the life of the community. This theory leaves unexplained how the Song, all but devoid of religious content, became more than a ditty sung at weddings.

The liturgical view also argues for an original religious content, albeit an idolatrous one that is censured in the Bible. Supposedly, beginning as liturgy in an important part of Israel's religious past, it was later shaped and adopted into a form harmless to the Yahwistic cult, all the while remaining in its religious context.

A more satisfactory way of explaining the process by which the Song was included in the Yahwistic and *mizbēaḥ*-condemning Bible as we have it (not some other imagined religious document) is that of reading the Song as a polemic against the fertility cult.[17]The worship of various goddesses alongside Yahweh was pervasive in ancient Israel. King Solomon set up the likeness of Asherah in the temple of Yahweh. One important facet of the struggle between the exclusive claims of Yahweh and the worship of Canaanite deities lay in the interpretation of sexuality. In ancient Near Eastern thinking, sex was ritually linked to the

goddess and believed to possess magical properties. In antiquity, it was believed that

> sexual intercourse releases divine power into the world to refresh the reproductive forces of nature, to renew the power of the king, and to stimulate fertility in domestic animals and in women. Even sex occurring privately and spontaneously between individuals recalls this primary religious archetype; as a result, where the goddess reigns, the personal aspect of sexual interplay does not fully emerge.[18]

The Song serves to undermine this view of sex. It is no longer mythical Inanna who embarks on a treacherous journey — but any ordinary girl who falls in love. “Who is this, bright as the sun, pure as the moon,” whose glance unsettles the boy (6:10)? Just “the only daughter of her mother,” one unique maiden among many (6:9).

> The Song is unashamedly sexual, and not apparently religious at all. It is also quite free of any specific references to the fertility cults of Israel’s neighbors. Since no cultic-mythological significance is apparent, we should acknowledge the Song’s free and open attitude to human sexuality as opposed to the sexual religious practices of Canaanite fertility religion. Perhaps the Song was included in the canon because it was a non-mythological, non-cultic, non-idolatrous, outright, open celebration of God-given sexual love[19]

The kind of material preserved in the Song of Songs may have played an important part in the history of Israel toward supplanting the fertility cult with a different vision of sexuality. Sexuality itself in the ancient world was intrinsically religious, but by exposing oneself to the picture of love painted in the Song, one’s own perspective is corrected, with one’s vision of God the Creator necessarily following. It is the task of the expositor to present clearly the images and definitions of love found in the Song. In that way, the God of all passion will be known anew.

The Song presents many paradigms for the multifarious experience of love. Love as a power that controls human life is warned against; love as a potent and desirable experience is celebrated; love as an ordeal of yearning, unsatisfied physicality, and societal constraint is an object lesson. The Song defines love as exclusive, resembling a covenant, supervised by the family in youth and with a public aspect when mature.Lovers are never quite apart because the world takes on the semblance of the beloved.

The Wedding of the Great King is the paradigm for all loves, and ultimately this points to the love of Christ for his church. The love of Christ (which death cannot extinguish) stands behind all loves, and for this love all Chris tians hope and lovers foretaste. For this reason, temporal loves are not ultimately satisfying, and they always leave a residue of longing for eternal love.Thus the Song of Songs puts on display part of God's creation that points away from itself to the love that truly satisfies.

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6. OUTLINE

I. The Title (1:1)
II. The Anthology of Songs (1:2 – 8:12)
A. Daydreams and Perfume in the Presence of the King (1:2 – 12)
1. In the Presence of the King (1:2 – 4)
2. Reminiscences (1:5 – 8)
3. In the Presence of the King (1:9 – 12)
B. An Outdoor Fantasy (1:13 – 2:7)
1. Love in the Glade (1:13 – 2:3a)
2. Love in the Wine House (2:3b – 6)
3. Adjuration to Beware of Love (2:7)
C. Turn, My Beloved, Be Like a Gazelle! (2:8 – 17)
1. My Lover Arrives (2:8 – 9)
2. My Lover Calls (2:10 – 15)
3. My Response (2:16 – 17)
D. Upon My Bed I Sought Him, but I Did Not Find Him (3:1 – 5)
1. My Disturbing Dream (3:1 – 4)
2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (3:5)
E. Who Is This Coming Up from the Desert? (3:6 – 11)
F. You Are All Beautiful, There Is No Flaw in You (4:1 – 7)
G. I Have Come into My Garden, My Sister, My Bride (4:8 – 5:1)
1. Lebanon (4:8 – 11)
2. Paradise (4:12 – 5:1a)
3. Encouragement to Love (5:1b)
H. I Opened to My Lover, but He Had Turned and Gone (5:2 – 8)
1. My Disturbing Dream (5:2 – 7)
2. Adjuration to Keep a Secret (5:8)
I. Tell Us about This Lover! (5:9 – 6:3)
1. What Kind of Lover Is He? (5:9 – 16)
2. Where Has He Gone? (6:1 – 3)
J. Who Is This, As Awesome as an Army with Banners? (6:4 – 10)
K. Let Us See Whether the Vine Has Budded (There I Will Give You My Love) (6:11 – 7:12 [13])
1. Looking for Signs of Spring (6:11 – 13 [7:1])
2. How Fair You Are (7:1 – 6 [7:2 – 7])
3. I Am My Lover’s and His Desire Is for Me (7:7 – 10 [7:8 – 11])
4. Let Us Look for Signs of Spring (7:11 – 12 [7:12 – 13])
L. Oh, That You Were Like a Brother to Me! (7:13 – 8:4 [7:14 – 8:4])
1. If Only You Were Mine (7:13 – 8:3 [7:14 – 8:3])

2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (8:4)
M. Who Is This, Coming Up from the Desert? (8:5 – 7)
1. Love and Death (8:5 – 7a)
2. Love and Pauperization (8:7b)
N. Solomon,You Can Keep Your Silver (8:8 – 12)
1. Reminiscence (8:8 – 10)
2. Parable of Solomon's Vineyard (8:11 – 12)
III. Final Thought (8:13 – 14)

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2. Ibid., 9.

3. E.g., Jean Daniélou, "The Canticle: A Song of Sacraments," *Orate* 25 (1950 – 51): 97 – 103, 161 – 65; Thomas Fountain, "A ParabolicView of the Song of Solomon," *BETS* 9/2 (1966): 97 – 101; Bishoi Kamel, "Repentance in the Song of Solomon" (trans. L. Soliman) *Coptic Church Review* 6/1 (1985): 13 – 16; and Joseph R. Sizoo, "Winds of God [Song of Solomon 4:16]," *JRT* 10/2 (1953): 149 – 54.

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8. Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977).

9. See Theophile J. Meek, “The Song of Songs: Introduction,” *IB*, 5:95: “The transforming influence of later Yahwism has almost completely obliterated the elements of the dying and rising god, the sacred marriage, and the place of the king in the rites.”

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13. Chaim Rabin, “Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry,” *SR* 3/3 (1973 – 74): 206.

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15. Athalya Brenner, “Aromatics and Perfumes in the Song of Songs,” *JSOT* 25 (1983): 75.

16. Linda Munk, “Giving Umbrage: The Song of Songs which is Whitman’s,” *Literature and Theology* 7 (1993): 53.

17. The Bible condemns Pope’s hypothesized original setting of the Song, the *marzea*m*h*. feast, in Jeremiah 16:5 – 9 and Amos 6:3 – 7.

18. Connie Whitesell, “Behold,Thou Art Fair, My Beloved,” *Parab* 20 (1995): 93 – 94.

19. John Snaith, *Song of Songs* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 5.

Text and Exposition

I. THE TITLE (1:1)

1 Solomon’s Song of Songs.

COMMENTARY

1 The first line titles the book and associates it with Solomon and with the section of the Bible called “sapiential” or “wisdom” literature. In fact, the Song offers a perspective on love not unlike that of the book of Proverbs. It is unclear whether the title asserts Solomonic authorship (see Introduction).

The title “Song of Songs” has been read as though it identifies the genre as “an anthology of songs.” Though it is an anthology of songs, the syntax is that of the absolute superlative degree analogous to “King of kings,” “Holy of holies,” “vanity of vanities,” or “forever and ever.” It is the “Greatest song.”

One may read the Song expecting the finest sapiential song of love that the world has ever known. We may agree with Rabbi ʿAkiba that the whole world does not match in worth the day that God gave the Song of Songs to Israel.

NOTE

1 The *lamed* before Solomon’s name, לִשְׁלֹמֹה (*liššōmōh*), is usually read as a *lamed auctoris*, i.e., an attribution of authorship; however, it may also indicate the subject matter or an interest in the named personage. *Šîr haššîrîm ʾăšer liššōmōh* may then be read, “The Song of Songs, which pertains to Solomon.”

II. THE ANTHOLOGY OF SONGS (1:2 – 8:12)

OVERVIEW

The Song of Songs can be divided into fourteen vignettes, each composed of smaller units, called strophes. Each vignette offers a unique insight into the varieties of human love and can be interpreted more or less independently of the others. But the Song is greater than the sum of its parts and the vignettes together produce an overall effect. The Song must be read as a unity even as the vignettes are read individually.

A. Daydreams and Perfume in the Presence of the King (1:2 – 12)

OVERVIEW

This vignette begins and ends in the fragrant presence of the king. It is divided into three stro-phes: the present royal setting, reminiscences, and the present royal setting. The contrast between the middle strophe and the others is that between youth and maturity, between the time before love and the time when love is pleased to arise. Love in adolescence is hardly pleasant.

1. In the Presence of the King (1:2 – 4)

2 Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth —
for your love is more delightful than wine.

3 Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes;
your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the maidens love you!

4 Take me away with you — let us hurry!
Let the king bring me into his chambers.
We rejoice and delight in you;

we will praise your love more than wine.
How right they are to adore you!

COMMENTARY

2 The anthology immediately opens with the girl's impassioned plea for the king's sultry affections. The girl speaks far more than the boy in the Song, and she seems more active and even aggressive. One should not misread the rubrics "*Beloved* "and "*Lover*" in some Bibles (e.g., the NIV) as indications that the girl is more passive and the boy more active in matters of love. By this rule, the girl should be called "Lover" and the boy "Beloved"! The Song introduces the reader to love in the words of a girl who is expressing her desire to be touched.

She delights in the boy's lovemaking more than she delights in fermented wine. The similarity between love and alcohol is a theme that runs throughout the Song. Both yield pleasure and enjoyment; both are dangerous.

3 The girl delights in the boy's fragrant oils and compares their aroma to his "name." His reputation and character have made him desirable in the eyes of all who know him, so the maidens, who know nothing of his kisses, also love him from afar.This fact heightens her enjoyment of his lovemaking. Even in love, character counts. And so does cologne.

4a The girl's stimulated condition makes her impatient for privacy. The "king" brought her to his chambers. Is this a regal union and 1:5 – 8 an imagined pastoral fantasy? Or is the boy a shepherd whom the girl pretends a king? The reader cannot know for certain. Whether in fact or in fantasy, the girl is whisked away to the private royal suite.

4b The strophe concludes with other voices expressing their admiration for the king. In English the second personal pronoun has no gender, but in Hebrew it is clear that the praise is directed to the king.Terminology akin to worship occurs here in the Song: "Let us rejoice! Let us exalt! Let us remember!" The king, whoever he may be, inspires veneration by his peers.

NOTES

2 Abraham Mariaselvam (*The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems* [AnBib 118; Rome: Editrice Pontifico Instituto Biblico, 1988], 64) suggests that נְשָׁקֵנִי “kiss me with kisses,” is onomatopoeic, “the sound effect of the action of kissing.” The change of person, “let *him* kiss me . . . for *your* love is more delightful than wine” is an example of enallage, a well-known rhetorical device in which one grammatical form is substituted for another. It should not be read (with the dramatists) as though the girl were telling her beloved to permit another to kiss her!

4a Here we have another example of enallage, “Take me away with *you*.. . . Let *the king* bring me.. . .”

4b Following 7:9, Fox, 200, reads מֵישָׁרִים as “smoothness” and repoints מִישָׁרִים to מִיָּיִן, “More than smooth wine do they love you.” Usually מֵישָׁרִים is read as “rightly” or “the righteous.” Those who are righteous worship and love the king.

2. Reminiscences (1:5 – 8)

5 Dark am I, yet lovely,
O daughters of Jerusalem,
dark like the tents of Kedar,
like the tent curtains of Solomon.

6 Do not stare at me because I am dark,
because I am darkened by the sun.
My mother’s sons were angry with me
and made me take care of the vineyards;
my own vineyard I have neglected.

7 Tell me, you whom I love, where you graze your flock
and where you rest your sheep at midday.
Why should I be like a veiled woman
beside the flocks of your friends?

8 If you do not know, most beautiful of women,
follow the tracks of the sheep

and graze your young goats
by the tents of the shepherds.

COMMENTARY

5 – 6a The girl's native beauty is not overcome by the rays of the sun, which have melanized her.Though she is yet beautiful, she feels somewhat sunburned and asks her peers not to look at her. In this strophe, we are no longer in the royal court but have moved to the provenance of those exposed to the heat of the sun, the tenant farmer and shepherd.The girl is immature and subject to adolescent self-conscious feelings about her appearance. For these reasons, the strophe is best read as a reminiscence of the time before love flowered.

6b Here we find the reason for the girl's exposure to the sun. She had angered her brothers and was being punished. The brothers appear again in the last vignette of the Song — thus closing the book as it opens — with the girl recalling her past subjection to her family.

There is no father in the Song of Songs, and the mother is merely mentioned. The brothers fill the role of parental presence in the Song of love and speak for the family. This is analogous to the disposition of Rebekah in Genesis 24. Laban, her brother, supervised the initial negotiations. Abraham's servant gave gifts to Laban and Rebekah's mother; her father, Bethuel, is not really a character in the story. In the same way, the brothers uphold the honor of the family in the Song of Songs.

What had the girl done to invoke the family's wrath? Reading the text in the light of the closing vignette and the theme of love, one may conclude that she was perceived to have behaved inappropriately in matters of love. If the vineyard may be read as a symbol of an affair, we see the girl chafing under the family's discipline and complaining that she is always a bridesmaid and never a bride, surrounded by love and yet having no relationship of her own. Will she ever know love? This question is answered in the closing vignette of the Song.

7 – 8 One may imagine the blushing girl approaching the object of her infatuation to inquire of his whereabouts later in the day. She wants to avoid the

embarrassment of inquiring after him. The boy teases her in reply and tells her to use common sense and tend to her sheep with the shepherds. Thus the picture of adolescence is painted, complete with concern over appearance, embarrassment of having one's feelings known, shyness, being subject to the whims of authority, and feeling left out of love. Love does not always engender comfortable feelings.

NOTES

6a Cherl J. Exum ("Asseverative ,אל in Canticles 1:6?" *Bib* 62 [1981]: 417) argues for the asseverative use of אל (לו) and reads, "Look on me that I am black!" It seems clear, however, that the cause of her blackness is the damaging heat of the sun, as is consonant with the remainder of the strophe in its presentation of young love as unsettling and awkward.

6b Thomas E. Fountain ("A Parabolic View of the Song of Solomon," *BETS* 9 [1966]: 100) suggests that the vineyard is her personal appearance. In the OT, it is always the brothers who uphold family honor and manage the girl (Ge 34:1 – 31; 2Sa 13:20, 32).

7 The participial form of עטה (לז) is employed to mean "one who covers oneself," i.e., "is veiled."

3. In the Presence of the King (1:9 – 12)

9 I liken you, my darling, to a mare
harnessed to one of the chariots of Pharaoh.

10 Your cheeks are beautiful with earrings,
your neck with strings of jewels.

11 We will make you earrings of gold,
studded with silver.

12 While the king was at his table,

my perfume spread its fragrance.

COMMENTARY

9 – 12 In this strophe the vignette has returned to the present and is characterized by lavish ornamentation and the fragrance of the girl's perfume in the king's presence. Along with other observations, the fact that Pharaoh is mentioned suggests that if it is King Solomon in the vignette, the girl may be identified as the daughter of Pharaoh.In these verses we hear the king speak for the first time. He compares the girl to a regal equine prized by Pharaoh and adorned with gold and silver. Others speak of their intention to beautify the young lady. In contrast to her days as a youth, she is indulged and encouraged in love. The vignette closes as it began with the girl in the aromatic environs of the king.

NOTES

9 The *yod* ending of לְסֻסָתִי (*lsusātî*) should not be read as a possessive suffix, "to my mare," but as the old genitival case ending, "to the mare of."

12 מְסַב (*mēsab*)elsewhere always means "round about" (1Ki 6:29; Job 37:12). בְּמסִבּוֹ (*bimsibbô*) is glossed in the NIV's "at his table." A meaning akin to the חֶדֶר (*heder*)of 1:4 may be intended: "While the king was in his element."

B. An Outdoor Fantasy (1:13 – 2:7)

OVERVIEW

The second vignette knows nothing of the royal court. Here the amorous couple strolls through a wooded glade, where they are not shy to evince pleasure in each other. Each is unique in the other's eyes. Passion awakens and

lighthearted banter gives way to the interlocking of limbs and bodies. As the two approach sexual rapture, the vignette abruptly breaks away to instruct and warn the reader of the power of love.

1. Love in the Glade (1:13 – 2:3a)

13 My lover is to me a sachet of myrrh
resting between my breasts.

14 My lover is to me a cluster of henna blossoms
from the vineyards of En Gedi.

15 How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes are doves.

16 How handsome you are, my lover!
Oh, how charming!
And our bed is verdant.

17 The beams of our house are cedars;
our rafters are firs.

2:1 I am a rose of Sharon,
a lily of the valleys.

2 Like a lily among thorns
is my darling among the maidens.

3 Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest
is my lover among the young men.

COMMENTARY

13 – 14 While walking through the glade, the boy and girl express to one another feelings of affection inspired by the surrounding flora and fauna. Here

the girl compares the boy to aromatic blossoms and perfumes. Perhaps intentionally, the Hebrew is ambiguous — is it the sachet of myrrh or the lover himself who rests between her breasts?

15 One should not read the Greatest of Songs hastily. The boy reiterates his lover's beauty and compares her eyes to doves. How does the dove resemble her eyes? Perhaps her eyes look like a dove's eyes, or the outline of a dove traces her eyes in the genre of Egyptian art. The image is difficult to acculturate and requires the modern reader to consider the image thoughtfully. Perhaps it refers to the dove's graceful or fluttering motion. Dillow, 29, suggests that the dove symbolizes purity and thus virginity.

16 – 17 The make-believe character of this vignette is seen in the girl's pretend mansion. She imagines the lush grass is their bed, the interlocking branches of the trees their walls and ceiling."Imagine," she seems to say, "our house someday!"

2:1 – 3a The "rose" is probably an ordinary asphodel. The girl compares herself to common wildflowers. She is nothing special in her own eyes. The boy responds by comparing other damsels to thorns. To him she is a flower among them; all others are as unattractive as brambles.Here we find one aspect of love commended in the Song of Songs — true love is exclusive and fixates on a single object. He has eyes for no other.To her, he is the one sweet tree in a forest of ordinary trees.

NOTES

13 The verb לוּן (*lun*) often connotes "spend the night," as in its other use in 7:11. "Myrrh" is found seven times in the Song and eleven times in the OT as a whole.

14 En Gedi, "Fountain of the Kid," is a cliff-enclosed fertile oasis to the west of the Dead Sea.

16 רַעֲנָנָה (*ra'ănānâ*), "lush, green," usually modifies "tree.

17 Reading *Qere*, there are two *hapax legomena*, רַהִיטֵנוּ בְּרוֹתִים (*rahîṭēnû bᵉrôtîm*), glossed "our rafters are firs." רָהִיט (*rāhîṭ*) is perhaps related to fj/r/ (*rah.at*)., "watering trough." רַהַט (*rahaṭ*), is a dialectical form of the usual Hebrew בְּרוֹשׁ (*bᵉrôš*). בָּתֵּינוּ (*battênû*) literally reads, "our houses."

2:1 "Sharon" refers to the coastal plain from Athlit to Jaffa. The Old Greek and Vulgate do not take the word as a proper name. See 1 Chron icles 5:16, which couples Gilead and Sharon.

2. Love in the Wine House (2:3b – 6)

3b I delight to sit in his shade,
and his fruit is sweet to my taste.

4 He has taken me to the banquet hall,
and his banner over me is love.

5 Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.

6 His left arm is under my head,
and his right arm embraces me.

COMMENTARY

3b Love begins to propel the pair toward full engagement. In his shade she tastes his "fruit." It is unnecessary to imagine priapic and seminal imagery in the tree and the fruit. The boy is the tree whose fruit and shade indulge the girl; she finds pleasing her total experience of his masculinity. In this strophe the girl is decidedly passive in love.

4 The movement towards consummation intensifies. He has brought her to the "house of wine," another identification of love with alcohol (and the vineyard of the previous vignette). The "banner" is a military standard that signals the

identity of an encampment. Pope, 2, glosses, “His intent toward me Love.” The unmistakable design of the boy when he brought her to the house of wine, she says, was concupiscence. A literal banquet hall is as unnecessary to postulate as the houses of 1:16 – 17;perhaps the “wine-house” is part of the fantasy.

5 The girl is overwhelmed by the power of love.She cries out for sustenance because love has enfeebled her. In Egyptian literature the girl becomes lovesick because of the absence of her lover; only his presence can cure her. Here, however, his amatory presence makes her weak. The Song shows love to be a power that diminishes the vital powers of lovers.It is an intoxicating ordeal that is not for the timid.

6 The boy and girl finally are seen intertwined;his banner, indeed, was love.The reader would perhaps expect the next verse to celebrate the satisfying quality of sexual congress: “We had our fill of love” or “We were satisfied with love.” But the next verse hits like a slap of cold water.

NOTES

3b Literally, “I delighted and I sat in his shadow.”

4 Gordis, 204, translates from the Akkadian cognate *dgl* , “look upon”: “His glance upon me was loving.”This requires translating אַהֲבָה (*ʾahăbâ*)as “loving” rather than “love,” which lacks context in the strophe.

5 Lovesickness is a powerful negative experience. Amnon (2Sa 13) was visibly haggard day after day because he loved (אהב, *ʾhb*)Tamar. His true illness חלה, (*ḥlh*) led him to feign illness חלה, (*ḥlh*) to rape her.

3. Adjuration to Beware of Love (2:7)

7 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken
love until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

7 This is the first of four verses that conclude a vignette by urging the reader to respect the power of love. It is arguably the moral of the Song of Songs.A stroll in the glade inevitably led to lovesickness and the cry for sustentation. This verse cries out, “Do not miss the point! It is dangerous to awaken or arouse love!”

The verb “charge” is translated elsewhere “swear,”but one does not swear by wild animals. The beasts are used symbolically in the Song for the girl’s breasts (4:5) and the boy’s avid sex drive (2:9). “Swear to me,” the girl seems to say, “by the power of sexuality.” The word “gazelles” is in Hebrew *ṣəbāʾôt,* identical with “hosts” of the divine appellation “LORD of hosts.” Also, “does of the field” sounds remarkably similar to *ʾēl šadday,* “God Almighty.” The beasts are circumlocutions for God.

The girl is then seen urging the maidens to swear, not merely by sexuality but also (using circumlocution) by the God of sexuality, not to arouse love prematurely. Swear by God, who has placed such potency in human love, to refrain from ardor until every element is in place.What are these elements? The Song explores these in vignette after vignette. One such element has been noted a few verses above — love should be individual-specific. If the heart of either is divided, then love is not yet pleased to arise.

NOTE

7 Other interpretations of this verse are possible. Falk, 19, offers, “Not to wake or rouse us / Till we fulfill our love.” This forces the meaning of the verb . חפץ (*ḥps*)and is grammatically weak. Love, not the lovers, is the object of the verbs. The KJV reads,“Stir not up, nor awaken *my* love / till he please.” The NASB reads, “That you will not arouse or awaken *my* love / Until she pleases.” The KJV lacks gender concord between the masculine sense and the feminine verb “please.”The NASB maintains gender concord but implausibly shows the boy as

speaking to the girl's companions.

Elsewhere, endearing epithets possess a pronominal suffix, e.g., "my lover." Though the definite article may substitute for a pronominal suffix, such usage is elsewhere unattested in the Song. Both the KJV and NASB put "*my*" in italics because the possessive pronoun is not in the Hebrew. "Love" is best understood as sexual emotion and desire, the same sense as the other occurrences in the vignette.

C. Turn, My Beloved, Be Like a Gazelle! (2:8 – 17)

OVERVIEW

This vignette begins and ends with verses comparing the lover to a gazelle and a young stag. This poetic device of bounding a unit with a repeated phrase is called "inclusio" and is commonly employed in the Song. Something like it was evident in the first vignette's opening and closing with the description of fragrance in the king's presence.This vignette's repeated material (the girl's wish that he come as a gazelle or a stag) is found in one more place — the conclusion to the Song as a whole.

The aspect of love discovered in this vignette is its seasonal character. Love has its natural time of awakening. The closing verse of the previous vignette implored the reader not to stir up love until it pleases. This vignette pictures the first stirrings of love — like the spring that follows moribund winter.

1. My Lover Arrives (2:8 – 9)

8 Listen! My lover!
Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.

9 My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag.

Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.

COMMENTARY

8 The vignette opens with the enlivened cry of the girl for her larger-than-life lover. A distinctive behavior of gazelles and deer is “pronking” or “stotting” — bounding straight up with all four limbs leaving the ground and landing together, often with the erection of the tail (Fritz R. Walther, *Communication and Expression in Hoofed Mammals* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984], 125).This is seen in times of excitement and youthful play. The boy is pictured as a pronking male gazelle at home in his natural terrain. Though gazelles commonly stot in alarm, their energized behavior is here an image of the boy’s wild vitality. As predators affect ungulates, so the girl affects her paramour.

9 Two verses earlier the girl implored her friends by the gazelle and doe; now she compares the boy to a similar pair. Some Mesopotamian magical spells consider gazelles the “epitome of sexual potency”(Snaith, 33). Great sexual energy drives the boy to draw near, to attempt to steal a glance, and to cry out to the girl. She is ensconced behind an impenetrable wall, so he cannot enter. He must persuade the young lady to come out to him (vv. 10, 13). In this vignette, she takes a decidedly passive role in love.

NOTE

9 Usually צִיץ (*ṣîṣ*) denotes “blossoming, flourishing,” which the ancient versions correctly glossed as “peeping, gazing,” because of its poetic context. Harold Fisch (*Poetry with a Purpose* [Indianapolis: Indiana Univ Press, 1988], 88) considers 2:9 – 14 to be one of three dreams in the Song.

2. My Lover Calls (2:10 – 15)

10 My lover spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,

and come with me.

11 See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.

12 Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.

13 The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me."

14 My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

15 Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.

COMMENTARY

10 One moral of the Song is, "Leave your father and mother and cleave to me!" Here the boy calls the girl to leave her abode and come away with him. One feature of the lovers' tête-à-tête throughout the Song is the many terms of endearment.Sweet nothings are ever on the lips of sweethearts.

11 – 13a The season motif is introduced as an analog to one facet of love. The word "time" (NIV, "season") is found only here in the Song. As nature awakens, the flower blooms, and the figs ripen, so the time has come for love to burst forth.In love's winter, before its time to ripen, the lovers were truly in love;

now that spring has arrived, this love is able to blossom. Thus the Song understands a winter love, a season of waiting in anticipation while in love yet apart. When love finally awakens, it does so with boundless energy and enthusiasm.

13b – 14 In place of the image of the wall and the lattice, what separates the lovers here is the inaccessible cleft of the rock, within which she is concealed. The boy cannot come to her but can only appeal to her heart. “Come away with me!” he cries, as though to say, “Leave your father and mother and cleave to me!” He longs for union.This longing is the longing nurtured in the winter and expressed in the spring — it is the flowering of passion. It is in this mood of unfulfilled desire that the Song of Songs closes in 8:13 – 14.

15 It is unclear who is speaking in this verse. The vineyard — the relationship — is now in full bloom. Though spring has arrived, and with it, love, the growth of the vineyard is not secure. Even in the spring of love, nothing is certain. The vineyards in bloom must be definitively and firmly protected from injury. Little foxes are known in antiquity to effect great damage to cultivation and are here an image for deteriorating forces adverse to love.

NOTES

10 The strophe can be subdivided by the inclusio of “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one,” here and in 2:13a.

11 The *Qere*, חַסְתְיו (*hasṯāyw*, “winter”) is a *hapax legomenon* with Near Eastern cognates meaning “rain.”This makes for a fitting description of winter in the Near East.

13 The fig tree “ripened” (root חנט, *ḥnṭ*), elsewhere always glossed “embalmed” (Ge 50:2).

15 Various interpretations have been offered for the image of the little foxes. In antiquity the damage as a result of foxes was most likely proverbial (Snaith, 41). Snaith and Murphy, 141, also argue that the foxes are young men whom the

girl's family must guard against. Michael Goulder (*The Song of Fourteen Songs* [JSOTSup 36; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986], 24) writes, "Fox-cubs, with their long, slim muzzles ending in rounded tips, make ideal male sex-symbols, suggested by the perfume-laden vines which are female sex-symbols, and which they do in fact despoil in later summer." There is, however, no hint in the Song of competition to win the love of the girl. It is in the context of her excitement at her lover's coming that the foxes are mentioned. The foxes are best left undesignated — to the imagination of the reader in love.

3. My Response (2:16 – 17)

16 My lover is mine and I am his;
he browses among the lilies.

17 Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.

COMMENTARY

16a "My lover is mine and I am his" is covenantal language, e.g., "I will be their God, and they will be my people." The Song does not treat love merely as a tryst in the wood or a casual and youthful affair; the use of covenant formulae reveals love's profundity. Biblical covenants involve lifelong commitment, progeny, and a code of behavior, and they are rooted in a historical association. While all of these elements may not be present in the simple phrase, it is patent that she feels comfortable describing her relationship as one of mutual ownership and fidelity.This is love when pleased to awaken.

16b The boy is seen in the image of the gazelle doing what gazelles do, grazing among "lilies." She is the field of lilies, and it is amidst her person and her life that he ranges. Later in the Song the boy enters the "garden" of the girl.

17 Gazelles are diurnal and most species are active in the early morning and late afternoon. Either the verse means, “When the day begins it is time for love,” or “Let us love until the day ends.” In answer to his plea above, she now entreats the boy to romp with her as a rutting gazelle, frolicking on the “rugged hills” of her body.

NOTES

17a J. Coert Rylaarsdam (“Song of Songs and Biblical Faith,” *BR* 10 [1965]: 13) argues that the lovers must part at dawn; Falk, 93, suggests that the girl employs caution by shooing away the boy in the morning lest their love affair be discovered. But she can hardly send him away to be “like a gazelle,” since he cannot leap on the “hills” when absent from her. Gazelles are diurnal, and a nocturnal intrigue cannot be explicated under the image of a rutting gazelle. Most species are active in the daylight but not in the heat of the day.

17b *ʾalṯᵉrāyw* II (*beter*), a *hapax legomenon*, is glossed “rugged” and treated by the KJV as an otherwise unknown place name, “Bether.” בתר (*btr*) connotes “cut in pieces” in Genesis 15:10, and בֶּתֶר I (*beter*) expresses “part of, piece.” S. Craig Glickman (*A Song for Lovers* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976], 17) reads “mountains of separation” as a reference to the girl’s breasts. One may read “mountains of cleavage.”

D. Upon My Bed I Sought Him, but I Did Not Find Him (3:1 – 5)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is the first of two dreams that afford insight into the inner life of the girl.Her desire evinced here reveals that love is not all sweetness and light.The Song explores the aspect of love that impels the girl to dream of dangerous nocturnal jaunts, borne of her driving need to possess him. Sexual desire unsettles the girl’s mind, thus forcing her to secure the boy in her powerful grip. Love enervates lovers. The Song again warns the reader that love

should be left alone until it is pleased to awaken.

1. My Disturbing Dream (3:1 – 4)

1 All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.

2 I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for him but did not find him.

3 The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
"Have you seen the one my heart loves?"

4 Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held him and would not let him go
till I had brought him to my mother's house,
to the room of the one who conceived me.

COMMENTARY

1a The word "night" in Hebrew is plural and may mean "night after night." She searches for her beloved ("the one my heart loves") while on her bed. This vignette seems a companion to 5:2 – 7, which opens, "I slept but my heart was awake." Her dream of searching is detailed in the next verses.(Alternatively, she may have awakened and arisen out of bed to actually search in the city streets.)

1b She looks for him while on her bed (asleep?)but does not find him. The motif of seeking and finding is part of the experience of love figured in the Song. Once in love, not all is right with the world unless the object of love is safely secured.

2 – 3 She arises to search for him.There are two possible outcomes of a search

such as this — she may find him, or she may not. This vignette exhibits what transpires in the event that she finds him;5:2 – 7 reveals the sorry alternative. In neither situation is she quite in her right mind. The silent guards find her, and she queries, “Have you seen the one I crave?” Love has driven her to behavior that is counter to her best interest.

Though in this vignette the danger is not evident, it is very real, and in 5:2 – 7 she suffers for her intrepid search. For the sake of love, people put themselves at risk. This time the guards do not assault her. Those who guard and protect the city walls do not encourage love.

4 She finally finds the object of her desire. She holds him and will not let him go. The verb used for “held” is ,אָחַז(GK 296), which occurs several verses earlier, “*Catch* us the little foxes” (2:15), and several verses later,“swords *grasped* by warriors” (3:8;NIV “wearing”). It is also used in 7:8 to describe seizing stalks to strip them of their fruit. This verb connotes violent clutching; here it indicates her fierce and unwavering grip to guarantee that she will reach her goal — to bring him to the chamber of her conception.

The word “room” (ḥeder) is used elsewhere in the Song only in 1:4, “The king has brought me in to his chamber” (NASB). Love drives her on until she has bedded him. Love empowers the girl to seek out her beloved, brave the night, and compel him to her uterus.The Song shows that love pushes aside prudence and security. In this vignette the boy is quite passive.

NOTES

1 נֶפֶשׁ (nepeš, GK 5883) as a subject with בִּקֵּשׁ (biqqēš) as a verb is rare in the Hebrew Bible. In Ecclesiastes 7:28, Qohelet’s “soul” seeks an intrigue; in Ecclesiastes, נֶפֶשׁ(nepeš)always has the meaning “appetite.” In Lamentations 1:11, 19 the impoverished people seek food to fill their נֶפֶשׁ. In the Song, נֶפֶשׁ often indicates sexual desire. שְׁאֲהֵבָה נַפְשִׁי (še’āhēbâ napšî) may be glossed “the one I long for,” “the one my voracity craves,” or “the one my appetite loves.” Her מִשְׁכָּב (miškāb,used once in the Song, is found on the lips of the adulteress in Proverbs 7:17 (see also Eze 23:17, “the bed of love”; Pr 5:16).

2 Libidinous desire motivates the girl. She goes about the city streets and open places, the haunt of the adulteress in Proverbs 7:8, 12.

4 Graham S. Ogden ("Some Translational Issues in the Song of Songs," *BT* 41 [1990]: 227) suggests the *yod* of הוֹרָתִי (*hôrātî*) is a possessive ending and should be read "my becoming pregnant"; thus, "I will not let him go until I bring him home, to the room where I would conceive." Horine persuasively argues that her conception chamber is her womb (Steve Horine, *Interpretive Images in the Song of Songs: From Wedding Chariots to Bridal Chambers* [New York: Lang, 2001], 108 – 9). "In other words, she is reenacting the intercourse of her parents" (Landy, 115). Her intention toward him is coition.

2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (3:5)

5 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
by the gazelles and by the does of the field:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

5 This refrain is repeated for the second time. It forces the reader to look for reasons in the vignette that might caution against love. Why not hastily and casually awaken desire? One will become dissatisfied alone in one's bed and will be driven to desperate measures to possess one's beloved. Passion, according to the Song of Songs, is not to be regarded lightly.

NOTE

5 See note on 2:7.

E. Who Is This Coming Up from the Desert? (3:6 – 11)

OVERVIEW

This vignette includes the only reference to a wedding in the Song, the wedding of Solomon.Solomon himself is passive and neither acts nor talks; he is not a character in the proper sense, only a royal figure in the distance. The perspective is that of a girl watching in excitement, calling on her friends to gaze at the trappings of ceremony on display.

It is not until the last line that the reader realizes that the spectacle has anything to do with matrimony. This emphasizes the importance of the event as a joyous wedding day. Many of the Song's — and especially this vignette's — motifs are echoed in Psalm 45. (Similarities include the girl's virginal companions, warriors beside the king, the queen's golden attire, and the presence of aloes and myrrh.)

Like Psalm 45, this vignette celebrates regal nuptials and should be read as a delightful spectacle.There is no hint that circumstances should be different from those described. This is true despite the fact that the bride is presented as part of the royal treasury, Solomon's booty. The vignette begins, "Who is this?" This phrase is found two other places in the Song (6:10; 8:5), once closing a vignette that critiques the harem of Solomon.

Love is not only between lovers; there also includes a public dimension. The wedding of the king is the most public of all, the paradigm of all weddings.

6 Who is this coming up from the desert
like a column of smoke,
perfumed with myrrh and incense
made from all the spices of the merchant?

7 Look! It is Solomon's carriage,
escorted by sixty warriors,
the noblest of Israel,

8 all of them wearing the sword,
all experienced in battle,
each with his sword at his side,
prepared for the terrors of the night.

9 King Solomon made for himself the carriage;
he made it of wood from Lebanon.

10 Its posts he made of silver,
its base of gold.
Its seat was upholstered with purple,
its interior lovingly inlaid
by the daughters of Jerusalem.

11 Come out, you daughters of Zion,
and look at King Solomon wearing the crown,
the crown with which his mother crowned him
on the day of his wedding,
the day his heart rejoiced.

COMMENTARY

6 From a distance, the procession appears merely as a cloud or pillar of smoke rising up from the ground. An observer asks, “Who is this?” The smoke is not merely the stirred-up dust but also burning incense and fragrant spices. One may recall the first vignette, in which the presence of the king is characterized by scent. The question seems to be, “Whose bride is this?” with the answer in the next verse, “Solomon’s bride!”

7 – 8 Sixty mighty men (the same number as the queens of the harem in 6:8) carefully guard Solomon’s carriage, which presumably carries the bride.The sword girded on the thigh is a feature of Psalm 45 that celebrates the love of the king for his bride.The threats of war and nighttime terrors necessitate a military line of defense. The bride is part of the apparatus of Solomon’s court and as such is treated as a state treasure. She is so absorbed into functionary status that it is unnecessary to mention her at all in this vignette!

9 – 10 Gold, silver, and wives are trademarks of prosperous and victorious kings (Dt 17:17; 1Ki 20:5). The carriage itself is described in terms that parallel the description of its escort. As the fighting unit was taken from the mighty men of Israel and as the wood of the carriage was taken from the trees of Lebanon, so

its “interior” is taken from the daughters of Jerusalem. The cohesive force that binds the girl to the carriage is love.

The ceremonial, political, fiscal, official, and statutory aspects of love are highlighted in the vignette.

Love does not remain merely passionate and sexual; it controls human life as it did the girl’s by cementing her to her governmental office of queen. This is a facet of love that is cause for celebration, pomp, and circumstance, and the rejoicing of the daughters of Zion. When Esther was made queen, all Persia celebrated (Est 2:18).

11 A reveler calls her companions to come and see the king wearing the crown that he received on his wedding day. As the bride is bound to the carriage by love, so the king’s jubilant heart is described by his symbol of office. In both cases, the public and official aspect of love is underscored. The wedding of the great king is cause for celebration by the entire populace. With the royal union comes the promise of blessing on the land and progeny: “Your sons will take the place of your fathers; you will make them princes throughout the land” (Ps 45:16).

There is a sense in which every marriage recapitulates the wedding of the great king. All may participate in Solomon’s nuptials as either spectator or lover. Whenever any lovers copulate, they are reenacting the paradigmatic royal wedding. This is perhaps the meaning of 8:5, which also begins, “Who is this coming up from the wilderness,” echoing 3:6, and continues to describe the very passionate lovemaking of the girl and boy under an apple tree. In the present vignette, the virginal daughters participate by rejoicing in the public display and wishing him well.

NOTES

6 Peter B. Dirksen (“Song of Songs 3:6 – 7,” VT 39 [1989]: 220) argues that since זֹאת (*zōʾt*) and עֹלָה (*ʿōlâ*) are feminine, the approaching carriage must bear the bride.

7 M. Fox (*The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Lyrics* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985], 121) suggests that the מִטָּה (*miṭṭâ*) is Solomon's stationary nuptial bed; however, the term is used in 2 Samuel 3:31 in the sense of "bier," and it is described as possessing a "riding seat" in 3:10. It is best understood as a carriage.

10 Daniel Grossberg ("Canticles 3:10 in the Light of a Homeric Analogue and Biblical Poetics," *BTB* 11 [1981]: 74), based on the Homeric description of Odysseus' bed, suggests that אֲהֻבָּה (*ʾăhubbâ*, GK 173) should be translated in line with the Arabic ,*ʾahāb*, "hide": "they made it with leather." Jacques Winandy ("La Litière de Salomon [Ct 3:9 – 10]," *VT* 15 [1965]: 108), however, reads the preceding *hapax legomenon* רְצוּף, *rəṣûp*) as "*disposé, agencé, aménagé*;" thus rendering אֲהֻבָּה as an adverb. Love is the binding energy that holds it all together. The private interior, taken from the daughters of Jerusalem, is held in place by institutionalized love. Literally, the phrase reads, "its-interior enjoined (by) love from-the-daughters-of Jerusalem."

REFLECTION

This vignette particularly resembles Psalm 45, a psalm of love. There the great king is described in all his glory, and beside him is the bride as the culmination of God's blessings. This psalm, which has more affinity to the Song of Songs than any other part of the Bible, is quoted in Hebrews 1:9 to refer to Christ. There is something about Christ's passionate love for the church (he "craves" the bride in Ps 45:11) experienced in the nuptial embrace.Every Christian, single or married, also participates in the celestial wedding between Christ and the church, which is the paradigm of every Christian marriage and is the substantial love reflected in all terrestrial loves.

F. You Are All Beautiful, There Is No Flaw in You (4:1 – 7)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is bounded by an inclusio pattern.It begins, “You are fair, my darling, you are fair!” and ends, “You are all fair, my darling, there is no flaw in you!” It is the first of four examples in the Song of the *wasf*, a genre that is part of traditional Syrian wedding ceremonies. Though there is no hint in it of anything alluding to matrimony, perhaps it is no accident that the first use of the genre follows the vignette of Solomon’s procession.

The *wasf* is a description of the beloved by his or her lover that moves linearly from the head to the feet (or vice versa). The description entails comparing bodily features to various specimens of flora, fauna, and artifice in ways that highlight some characteristic of the beloved. It is not always easy for the modern reader to appreciate the comparison.

The reader is invited into the work of synthesizing comparisons for one’s own beloved. Lovers see the world through beloved-colored glasses, whereby anything and everything is transformed into images of the beloved.

1 How beautiful you are, my darling!
    Oh, how beautiful!
    Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
    descending from Mount Gilead.

2 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,
    coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin;
    not one of them is alone.

3 Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;
    your mouth is lovely.
Your temples behind your veil
    are like the halves of a pomegranate.

4 Your neck is like the tower of David,
    built with elegance;
on it hang a thousand shields,
    all of them shields of warriors.

5 Your two breasts are like two fawns,

like twin fawns of a gazelle
that browse among the lilies.

6 Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
I will go to the mountain of myrrh
and to the hill of incense.

7 All beautiful you are, my darling;
there is no flaw in you.

COMMENTARY

1a The vignette opens with a repetition of 1:15 but adds the phrase "behind your veil." The reader must ask how her eyes behind her veil are like a dove. See comments on 1:15.

1b Gilead is a Transjordanian hilly region south and east of the Sea of Galilee. Imagination is required to appreciate the image presented in this verse. Picture the rippling motion of a densely packed flock of black goats sauntering down a hillside. This sight reminds the boy of the girl's hair.

2 This is much more than the banal compliment, "You have good teeth." Imagine a flock of white ewes all in a row by a lake, seen from a nearby hillside. Each ewe has its "twin," its reflection (Falk, 230), with the appearance of a row of teeth formed in a smile. This sight also reminds the boy of her smile whenever he sees the sheep by the water.

3a Her mouth is beautiful, highlighted by her red lips. The word used here for "mouth" is unique to the Bible and sounds like "wilderness" (see Notes); the word for "beautiful" sounds like "habitation." Fox, 204, calls this a "double pun." The girl has a "beautiful" "mouth," which is an "oasis" in the "desert." Her red lips outline her succulent and refreshing oral cavity, her beautiful mouth.

3b The image of the pomegranate most likely refers to the girl's mouth and completes the wordplay of "oasis in the desert." Her succulent mouth is

experienced as juice from an opening in a pomegranate. Senses other than sight are engaged in the *wasf* — in this case, taste.

4 The *wasf* is moving in a line from her hair downward. When the boy sees the tower of David bedecked with shields, he thinks of her neck adorned with a necklace. Meyers, 213, takes special note of the military imagery and sees in it the notion of might, strength, and defense. In Ezekiel 27:10 – 11, shields and helmets hung about the walls depict splendor. Throughout the Song, the girl is associated with danger (e.g., the figurative danger of scaling an inaccessible cliff in 2:14) and martial images.The Song returns repeatedly to the paradigm of the female as an imposing fortress best approached with caution. The splendor and power of the tower remind the boy of the imposing glory of the girl, even as its appearance resembles her necklace.

5 Her breasts are compared to young fawns of a gazelle. This is perhaps the most perplexing image in the *wasf* . Previously in the Song it was the boy who was a gazelle pronking upon the “mountains of cleavage.” Here the girl’s breasts are figured as twin browsing fawns. What is the point of comparison? Do her breasts look like gazelles? Smell like gazelles? Are they furry? The sensitive reader will not limit the possibilities to visible appearance but will allow the Song to engage all the senses.Perhaps her breasts are soft; perhaps the point of comparison is motion (gazelles travel with a graceful, bounding gait; see 2:8).

6 This verse echoes 2:17. The boy declares his intent to go to the hills of frankincense and the mountain of myrrh. The mounds are probably her breasts, as are the “rugged hills” of 2:17. The boy intends to romp with the twin female gazelles of her breasts.

7 In his eyes she has no “blemish” (NIV “flaw”).From head to toe Absalom had no “blemish” (2Sa 14:25). Deuteronomy 17:1 declares that an animal with no “blemish” is fit for sacrifice. The boy sees no imperfection in the girl. This vignette does not really describe what the girl looks like; rather, how the boy sees her. Neither physical nor inner beauty is at issue; rather, it is the beauty the boy imputes to her.

In the Song, love creates its own world. Within that world there are not merely herds and hills and towers and pomegranates; rather, in every moment the boy is

surrounded by echoes and reminders of his beloved. He is never alone. This is one aspect of love explored in this vignette.

NOTES

1 גלש (NIV “descending”) is found only here and in 6:5 in the Bible. Steven S. Tuell (“A Riddle Solved by an Enigma: Hebrew *glsh* and Ugaritic *glt*,” *JBL* 112 [1993]: 103) argues from the Ugaritic cognate *glt*, “wave of the sea,” to suggest גלש connotes rippling motion.

3a Fox, 204, argues that מִדְבָּר (*midbār*, “mouth,” which elsewhere means “wilderness”) — uniquely the “speaker” (root דבר *dbr*) — is intentionally juxtaposed with נָאוֶה (*nāʾweh*, “beautiful”), which sounds like נָוֶה (*nāweh*, “habitation”). These are found together in Isaiah 27:10.

3b Marc Rozelaar (“An Unrecognized Part of the Human Anatomy,” *Judaism* 37 [1988]: 101) argues that רַקָּה (*raqqā*, which, though always singular is usually glossed “temples”) is best translated “mouth.” He suggests a derivation from רֹק (*rōq*. To read “temples” deviates from the linear progression from head to toe of the *wasf*.“When [a pomegranate] ripens, it usually cracks, revealing the inside, which indeed resembles an open mouth.” Reading פְּלָח (*pelah*.) as “fissure,” the phrase can be glossed, “Like a ripening pomegranate is your mouth behind your veil.”

6 Dillow, 77, suggests the singular mountain of myrrh represents the *mons veneris*.

G. I Have Come into My Garden, My Sister, My Bride (4:8 – 5:1)

OVERVIEW

This vignette is the center of the Song of Songs and is divided into two major

strophes. The first identifies the bride with Lebanon. Though she is inaccessible, she ravishes him. He calls to her to come away with him. In the second strophe the boy takes full possession of the garden, his bride, with language designed to titillate all the senses.There is nothing of her that he does not fully taste and indulge. The experience of love climaxes with the boy's ejaculation: "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride!" The closing remark encourages the two to be inebriated with love.

Love in this vignette is rapturous and sensual.It is compared to drinking wine, eating fruit, and smelling and tasting spices, honey, and milk. Love is for the carnal enjoyment of lovers. It is through love that one enters paradise.

The picture of man and woman in the midst of a garden recalls the garden of Eden. A subterranean spring waters both gardens. The two are naked and not ashamed. As in Eden, there is no curse and no sin. Adam's cry at the sight of his mate, "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," is heard in the cry of the boy who has savored every fruit; but unlike in Eden, there is no forbidden fruit in the garden of the Song. The only command here is to take, eat, and be drunk on the produce of the garden and the girl's fountain. In this vignette, to lose oneself in sensual pleasure with one's spouse, recaptures Eden and enjoys unqualified endorsement.

1. Lebanon (4:8 – 11)

8 Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,
    come with me from Lebanon.
Descend from the crest of Amana,
    from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon,
from the lions' dens
    and the mountain haunts of the leopards.

9 You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
    you have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
    with one jewel of your necklace.

10 How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
    How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
    and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!

11 Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.
The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon.

COMMENTARY

8 Lebanon refers to two mountain chains north of Palestine. Amana probably refers to Jebel Zebedani of the eastern range, while Senir and Hermon to Jebel esh-Sheik of the western range. In the Song the term “bride” is unique to this vignette and helps bind it together as a unit. Elsewhere in the Bible the term refers to a woman who is related to the family by marriage: “sister-in-law,” “daughter-in-law,” “spouse.”Here, however, it is used as a term of endearment and may be no more literal than “sister” of 4:9. The epithet does indicate that the boy regards the girl, at least playfully, within the sphere of kinship.

He calls his “bride” to come to him from the highland lairs of lions and leopards. Again we see the female associated with danger and the boy unable to act except to exhort her to come away with him. Note the grand hyperbole. The girl, his “bride,” situated in the rich, aromatic, source of living water (4:15), also dwells with predacious brutes and is dangerous to approach. Yet the girl seems to have it within her power to leave “Lebanon” and come to him. The Lebanese spell she casts on him is explored through this strophe.

9 “You have stolen [ravished] my heart [*libbabtinî*, a paragram with ‘Lebanon’], my sister.” The term of endearment “sister” is common in Egyptian love lyrics. In the Song, it is found only in this vignette and in the first line of the next. With little effort on the part of the girl, the boy is mesmerized. With one “eye” and one “jewel” she has gained control over his heart and inflamed him with desire.

10 As in 1:2, where the girl exclaimed that the king’s love is better than wine, here the boy declares the same of her. Her love and her aroma charm him. Esther, in preparation for her night with the king, spent six months being treated with the same “balsam oils” (Est 2:12). This girl is ready for love.

11 This verse fills the mind with the image of a deep kiss. The girl, who a few verses before had been inaccessible, is now tasted; her lips savored, her mouth explored, her tongue relished. She carries with her the scent of Lebanon. As the boy breathes the Lebanese atmosphere, he prepares to penetrate her sealed well.

NOTES

8 "Amana" may relate to the river of 2 Kings 5:12.The word sounds like "Amen," which is the Hebrew verb translated "faithfully, truly." In characteristic fashion, the Old Greek mistranslates the proper name as *pisteōs*. See Deuteronomy 3:9 for Senir and Hermon.

9a Waldman suggests that לִבַּבְתִּנִי (*libbabtīnî*) may not be derived from the root לבב (*lēbāb*, GK 4222, "heart"), but from the late לבב (*labbēbu*, "be enraged"). He suggests a semantic evolution from "rage" to "be aroused" to "be aroused sexually." This is analogous to the Greek ὀργή (*orgē*). The Hebrew would be then glossed, "You have roused me to passion." See 1 Corin thians 9:5, ἀδελφὴν γυναῖκα (*adelphēn gynaika*), "sister-bride/wife."

9b "Eyes" in Hebrew is *mēʿênayik*, a paragram with *maʿyān*, "fountain," of the next strophe (v.12). Gender discord between the masculine numeral and the feminine noun indicates a verb, "glance," may have been lost.

10 – 11 The language of these verses is reflected in Proverbs 5:3: "For the lips of an adulteress drip honey / and her speech is smoother than oil." This is the language of seduction; the girl has captivated the boy with her many charms.

2. Paradise (4:12 – 5:1a)

12 You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;
you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

13 Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates
with choice fruits,
with henna and nard,

14 nard and saffron,
calamus and cinnamon,
with every kind of incense tree,
with myrrh and aloes
and all the finest spices.

15 You are a garden fountain,
a well of flowing water
streaming down from Lebanon.

16 Awake, north wind,
and come, south wind!
Blow on my garden,
that its fragrance may spread abroad.
Let my lover come into his garden
and taste its choice fruits.

5:1 I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride;
I have gathered my myrrh with my spice.
I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey;
I have drunk my wine and my milk.

COMMENTARY

12 Closing the inclusio from v.8, v.11 ended with the word “Lebanon.” A new movement now begins in the vignette with the boy shut out of the garden-spring. She is virgin soil, locked and sealed. Three features dominate this strophe. First, the girl is a “garden” full of spices and delectable fruits. Second, she is a “fountain” or “well,” a fount of abundant refreshing waters. Third, his olfactory sense is dazzled and he is enraptured as he inhales her omnipresent bouquet. She is an unsullied virgin, inviolate, now prepared and ready to receive her lover.

13a “Your plants,” or “your shoots,” possibly refer to her limbs. The term is likely derived from שׁלח (“to send”) and related to the form in Isaiah 16:8, “branches,” and Joel 2:8, “sword, spear.” Having tasted her mouth, tongue, and lips, he now moves on to her arms and legs. Her “shoots” are an orchard of pomegranates. “Orchard” is the Hebrew *pardēs*, “paradise.” Her extremities are his

paradise.

13b – 14 No fewer than nine spices are listed here, along with pomegranates and “choice fruits.”The sense of smell and taste are used as synecdoche for all the senses. Cinnamon is found three times in the Bible — including Proverbs 7:17, where the seductress has perfumed her bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. The perfumes are intended to entice and stimulate the senses. Here the Song treats the reader to a crescendo of taste and smell, a fast-paced bombardment of sensuality in which the boy wholeheartedly revels.

15 The lovemaking has reached the fount of romance, the girl as a well or spring. A few verses before, this fountain was sealed — an image of her virginity. It is now gushing living waters, streaming from Lebanon, the very nucleus of love. The image of woman as fountainhead is the dominant motif of Proverbs 5:15 – 18. There the wife is a “cistern,”“flowing,” “well,” and a “fountain.” What is in view there is specifically sexual intercourse. She is the “blessed” water from whom the man is instructed to drink. With the image of the girl as an unsealed “well” in Song 4:15, the love song has reached its apogee in emblematic coitus.

16 For the first and only time in this vignette the girl speaks, making clear her attitude toward sexual engagement with the boy. With six volitional verbs, she exclaims her desire for the experience to mount to climax. In ecstasy she calls on the winds to awaken and set the air astir with the scent of love, for fragrant oils to gush and flow, for her lover to enter his garden and eat all of its pleasant fruit! Her emphatic wish is to please, to be entered, to be enjoyed.

1a The girl’s six volitional verbs are followed by four perfectives of the boy. This multiple repetition consummates the superlative degree; there is nothing left to experience. He has savored it all. What he has tasted is described in rich sensuous language designed to titillate the senses. The olfactory and gustatory stimuli serve as synecdoche for all the senses; it is the girl that he has enjoyed, tasted, imbibed.

NOTES

12 The MT reads גַּל (*gal*, “spring”) in v.12b, but ancient versions read גַּן (*gan*, “garden”) twice:“A garden locked is my sister, my bride / A garden locked, a fountain sealed.”

13 *Pālāḥayik,* “your plants” (NIV), alternatively may be related to שִׁלֹּחַ (*šelaḥ*) in Nehemiah 3:15, “water conduit.” In that case, “canal” may be a metaphor for the vagina.

14 *Pbōnā,* “frankincense,” which ends the first line of the verse, is a paragram with the last word of 4:15, *Pbānôn,* “Lebanon.” The verb “locked” (*nʿl*) of 4:12 ordinarily signifies a door locked from the inside (Jdg 3:23 – 24; 2Sa 13:17 – 18).

15 “Fountain of gardens” (or “garden fountain”) refers to an irrigation system. Proverbs 23:27 reads, “the strange woman is a narrow well.” The well is a common image for the sexual woman.

16 The first verb the girl employs is the same as that used in 2:7 and 3:5, “Do not *awaken* love.”

3. Encouragement to Love (5:1b)

1b Eat, O friends, and drink;
drink your fill, O lovers.

COMMENTARY

5:1b In the second vignette (1:13 – 2:7), when the couple approach coital contact, the vignette suddenly breaks off into a cold warning not to stir up love until it pleases (2:7). Here a different moral is offered. The final comment implores the twosome to eat, drink, and be intoxicated. In the final analysis, the perspective of love offered in this vignette is that it is like alcohol. Using the Hebrew verb *rwh* (GK 8115), Proverbs 5:19 reads, “Let her breasts *satisfy* you always,” and in Proverbs 7:18 the adulteress says, “Come, let us *satiate ourselves* with love.” “A barren womb is never satisfied [*śbʿ*, GK 8425]” (Pr

30:16), and the harlot of many lovers “was not *satisfied* [שׂבע] (Eze 16:28 – 29).

Words such as *rwh* , שׂבע, and מלא (GK 4848) are used throughout the Bible to indicate “satisfaction.”This language is not used in the Song of Songs. Love is not idolized, and the Song does not claim that love ultimately satisfies. The closest the Song comes is to speak of “becoming drunk” with love. Unlike wisdom, which is compared to a well-prepared meal in Proverbs 9, love is compared to an intoxicant. The verb שׁכר (GK 8910, “drunk”) in 5:1 is often a synonym for “confusion”: “You will be drunk, but not with wine” (Isa 29:9; 49:26; 51:21; Na 3:11). In Scripture, to drink is to become disoriented, lose one’s self-control, and have an enjoyable time doing it.

Love is encouraged, commended, and celebrated in this vignette for what it is — a whirlwind of pleasure, a powerful inebriant. In love, as with alcohol, caution and normal inhibition are cast aside. This is one facet of love celebrated in this vignette that stands in stark contrast to the picture of love in the next.

NOTE

1b Daniel Grossberg (“Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible,” *HS* 35 [1994]: 9) renders “drink to inebriation of love.” Outside the song, שׁכר (שׁכר, GK 8910) occurs nineteen times, sixteen in a negative sense. In Genesis 43:34, Joseph intended his brothers to drink such that the next day they would believe that Benjamin took the golden cup. Thus within this positive use of שׁכר is the common sense of loss of control and vulnerability. The other positive use of שׁכר is in Haggai 1:6, “You drink, but not to drunkenness,” where it highlights the desirability of drink. Imbibers want to become drunk.

H. I Opened to My Lover, but He Had Turned and Gone (5:2 – 8)

OVERVIEW

In the dream of 3:1 – 4 the girl searched the streets and squares for her lover. She eventually found him. The present vignette repeats the seek-and- find motif but also chronicles what transpires when the girl *fails* to recover the object of her desire. The vignette lends insight into the inner life of the girl: her anxiety, erotic fantasy, confusion, and lovesickness. Love is not for the timid! In contrast to the preceding vignette, the picture of love presented here is not pleasant. Love will drive lovers to act counter to their own best interest, throw caution to the wind, dash into danger, and languish in misery. In a sense, the girl is not in her right mind.

This vignette is a masterpiece of double entendre and should be read on two levels. On one level, the boy arrives at the girl's domicile, calls to her, attempts to open a door, and finally leaves. The other level is the most titillating material in the Song. Her disturbed mindset is interwoven with her erotic fantasies, thus in the end leaving her sick with love.

1. My Disturbing Dream (5:2 – 7)

2 I slept but my heart was awake.
Listen! My lover is knocking:
"Open to me, my sister, my darling,
my dove, my flawless one.
My head is drenched with dew,
my hair with the dampness of the night."

3 I have taken off my robe —
must I put it on again?
I have washed my feet —
must I soil them again?

4 My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening;
my heart began to pound for him.

5 I arose to open for my lover,
and my hands dripped with myrrh,
my fingers with flowing myrrh,
on the handles of the lock.

6 I opened for my lover,

but my lover had left; he was gone.
My heart sank at his departure.
I looked for him but did not find him.
I called him but he did not answer.

7 The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
They beat me, they bruised me;
they took away my cloak,
those watchmen of the walls!

COMMENTARY

2a While the girl sleeps, her "heart" is "awake."This idiom probably depicts a dream state of consciousness. The verb ʿwr (“awake”) is used two verses earlier (“Awake, north wind!”) as well as in 2:7 and 3:5 (“Do not *arouse* or *awaken* love until it so desires”). The girl lies on her bed in a sexually stimulated state.

2b “The voice of my lover” (qôl dôdî) is a phrase found in 2:8, where the boy stands by the window and bids the girl to come away with him. A common motif in the Song is that of the boy imploring the distant girl but unable to approach her and waiting for her response. Here is the same motif, this time with the boy’s voice pummeling the girl as he entreats her to open to him. “Open” (*pth*.) can refer to the womb (Ge 29:31; 30:22) and to undressing (Job 12:18; Ps 30:12). The vignette is replete with double entendre, and perhaps the call to “open” has a sexual overtone. In the previous vignette, the girl was a garden locked from the inside. Here again his entry is controlled by the inclination of the young lady.

The boy desires to escape the night, his body wet with condensate as he urgently enjoins her. Again we are privy to his tender terms of endearment. She is his “flawless one.” Outside the Song, the term usually refers to moral integrity (Job 1:1; Pr 29:10). Here, however, it seems to refer to physical perfection (Ge 25:27). She is his “sister,” a term that associates this vignette with its only other use in the previous vignette. There the lovers were drunk with passion, with the boy tasting every succulent fruit. Here the boy fails to gain entry, and love is lost.

3 The girl is naked and her feet are clean. She is faced with a choice — to open or not to open. Her hesitation is due to her concern with her nudity and her cleanliness. In the Hebrew Bible, “feet” is a euphemism for genitalia.To “cover the feet” is to urinate (Jdg 3:24); a newborn is “that which issues from between the feet” (Dt 28:57); pubic hair is the “hair of the feet” (Isa 7:20); to spread the feet is to present the vagina for intercourse (Eze 16:25).Because the girl is concerned about her nudity and unsullied “feet,” she does not open to her lover. Her self-interest obviates love.

4a “My lover thrust his hand through the [hole].” “Hole” has no modifier such as “*latch*hole,” “hole *of the door*,” or “*key* -hole,” thereby augmenting the double entendre. Her lover “sent” or “thrust” his hand into the hole. The word “hand”is a euphemism for the erectile organ. The harlot “saw the hand” (Isa 58:8); the Manual of Discipline at Qumran (1QS 7:13) declares that the one who “puts out his hand” from beneath his clothing will be punished. On one level, the boy is probably trying to penetrate her dwelling, but in her mind his phallus penetrates her personal aperture.

4b The thrusting of his hand makes her “bowels roil” (lit.). Her *mēʿeh* (“insides, intestines”) refer to internal organs. It is a synonym for “womb” in Genesis 25:23. The verb “roil, surge” in Proverbs 20:1 is glossed “strong drink is raging.” In Jeremiah 31:20,Yahweh expresses his feelings for his son as, “My bowels yearn for him.” It stands for the roaring of the sea, the tumult of a crowd.The last word in the verse may also be translated “upon him,”yielding, “My insides roiled upon him.” The girl is stimulated to an orgiastic state.

5 Her first worry over her state of undress and her cleanness has been overcome. No longer concerned with these, in a sexually charged condition she finally rises to open to her lover. In language reminiscent of the previous vignette, her rising to open is extravagantly described. Her hands drip with myrrh, her fingers with liquid myrrh that run over the “palms” of the lock. The lock recalls 4:12, the “locked garden” of the girl. There the lock and seal represented her virginity. Here the lock of the girl possesses “palms” and flows with myrrh. “Palm”in Genesis 32:25, 32 is glossed “thigh”; in Deuteronomy 25:12 it may refer to female circumcision.In Jeremiah 4:31, a woman spreads her “palms,” i.e.,thighs or legs, in labor. The girl’s “lock” with its “palms” is wet with odoriferous moisture. She is ready to open for him.

6a Too late she finally opens to her lover. Her initial concern with nudity and cleanliness made her hesitate. Because she has wavered, he leaves her alone in her affected state.

6bThe sentence reads literally,“My soul departed at his leaving.” In Genesis 35:18, the departing of a נפשׁ (*nepeš*) denotes clinical death. She swoons and describes her experience as deathlike when she opens for him and he is gone. When under the power of love, one’s soul is not one’s own, and one feels as though dying when denied. She searches for him, calls for him, without result. He gives no answer. Love has been lost.

Notice how love has placed the girl in a double bind. She did not want to open, but not opening was ultimately worse. Against her own best interest and initial impulse, she finally was driven to open to her lover, only to grow faint and sick with love and feel wounded and assaulted.

7 In 3:1 – 4 the girl queried the watchmen;here the watchmen assault her. This is the darkest moment in the Song of Songs. The girl suffers because love has driven her to take inordinate risks.The guards “struck” her. Usually the verb *nkh* means “slay” (see Pr 23:13 – 14, “Smite him with the rod”). “They bruised me” uses פצע found twice elsewhere, together with *nkh* in 1 Kings 20:37 and in Deuteronomy 23:1, to refer to sexual injury.

In a final indignity afflicted on the young woman, the night watchmen lift her finery from her. The guardians of the walls molest and strip the girl. This is what transpires in the event that she fails to find her lost love. The girl, in her dreams, imagines a dark and violent scenario. Love is not celebrated in the Song apart from the recognition of its danger. With this vignette, the Song of Songs again presents yet another aspect of love.

NOTES

2 דופק (*dôpēq*) in this verse is usually rendered “knocking”— the boy knocks at the door and begs for entry. In the Hithpael precisely this sense is found in Judges 19:22.This approach must read קול (*qôl*) as “sound” or “noise” rather than “voice,”

though the verse continues with the lover's appeal. In Genesis 33:13 the verb is glossed "drive hard." The word "door" is nowhere in the vignette, and the Qal participle דֹּפֵק is used as the predicate of the verbless clause. This construction is seen in Genesis 4:10, "The voice of your brother's blood *is crying out* (צֹעֲקִים, *ṣō'ăqîm*) to me." His voice pummels the girl.

3 Tamar tore her *kĕtōnet* ("robe") after being raped by Amnon (2Sa 13:19). The harlot is to be "stripped" (פַּשְׁטָה, *pāšṭâ*) and left naked and bare (Eze 16:39). The girl here had stripped off her robe, i.e., she was *au naturel*. ð מָנַף (*mnp*) is a *hapax legomenon* with Aramaic and Akkadian cognates and should be read "soiled."

4a M. Delcor ("Two Special Meanings of the Word יָד in Biblical Hebrew," *JSS* 12 [1967]: 230 – 40) suggests a relationship between יָד (*yd*) and יָדִיד (*ydyd*, "beloved"), both used in this verse. In that event, יָד I, "hand," should be distinguished from יָד II, "penis," from the root יד/וד (*yd/wd*, "to love").

5 See Lyle M. Eslinger ("The Case of an Immodest Lady Wrestler in Deuteronomy 25:11 – 12," *VT* 31 [1981]: 269 – 81) for a more detailed account of the use of *kap* (translated "handles" in the NIV here) in the Bible. Quoting from Cunningham's manual of practical anatomy, Eslinger, 276, writes, "Regarding the specific anatomical identity of the *kappôt hammaʿăl* it is possible to suggest the vaginal vestibule and bulbs, along with the bulbospongiosus muscle as the locking or barring mechanism (*hammaʿăl*) and the labia minora and majora as the plural appendages which together form the walls of the vulvic cavity." Though the poetic line will not bear this exacting description, the double entendre does suggest female anatomy.

6a The verb *ḥmq* ("left") elsewhere occurs only in Jeremiah 31:22:"How long will *you go here and there,* O faithless daughter?"

6b דָּבַר I (*dbr*) carries the meaning,"lead, push back," and here describes the departing of the girl's lover. Alternatively, one may read דָּבַר II, "My soul departed at his speaking." See NIV text note.

7 The girl's garment, *rĕdîd*, is found elsewhere only in Isaiah 3:23 in a list of finery. The guards "lifted" it as Ruth "lifted" her skirt (Ru 2:18).

2. Adjuration to Keep a Secret (5:8)

8 O daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you
if you find my lover,
what will you tell him?
Tell him I am faint with love.

COMMENTARY

8 The same girl who had wavered because of her clean feet began hunting for her lover through the alleyways, only to return home assaulted and demeaned. Her "soul," her "voracity," forced her to choose between the lesser of two evils of forbidding and allowing entry. Neither choice was satisfactory. First she underestimated her own concupiscence and hesitated. This was an untenable situation, for her passion grew overpowering. Since she did pause, however, opening to her lover only caused her suffering. The choice to open was finally inescapable, since she had lost her self-control and her conduct was determined by libidinal fever.

In the end the girl languishes at home and informs her companions that she is lovesick. "Do not tell him," she says weakly, "that I am ill from love" (see Note). If the episode is a dream that highlights the inner conflict between what she desires and the behavior that is expected of her, the reader may wonder at the confusion of her inner life. The "wall" is mentioned in the Song again only in 8:9 – 10, where it seems to be an image for the girl's virtue. In her dream, the guardians of the walls punish her for her fervent pursuit (5:7). At the very least, the reader is left with a picture of what love can do to the psyche, the emotional contortions that are a necessary part of the experience of love.

The phrase "I charge you" is the same as that in 2:7 and 3:5, here recited without reference to the divine circumlocutions. At this point in the Song, the reader may assume that this is ellipsis and the objects of the oath are understood. She previously adjured her friends to refrain from arousing love;this adjuration highlights what can happen when love is stirred. It is as though the Song says, "Are you yet ready, O reader, for this love?"

NOTE

8 Fox, 205, persuasively argues that *mah-taggîdî lî* should be translated, “Do not tell him,” rather than, “What will you tell him?” The other adjurations are negative, and *mah* is read as a negative particle. Thus the vignette ends with the girl embarrassed and pleading with her companions not to tell the boy what she did.

I. Tell Us about This Lover! (5:9 – 6:3)

OVERVIEW

This vignette continues the thought of the last.In response to the girl’s request, the maidens inquire of her, what makes this man so special? Her answer is the second *wasf* of the Song (see comments on 4:1 – 7). Imagine an unmarried young woman talking with her girlfriends about the object of her ardor.

1. What Kind of Lover Is He? (5:9 – 16)

9 How is your beloved better than others,
most beautiful of women?
How is your beloved better than others,
that you charge us so?

10 My lover is radiant and ruddy,
outstanding among ten thousand.

11 His head is purest gold;
his hair is wavy
and black as a raven.

12 His eyes are like doves
by the water streams,
washed in milk,
mounted like jewels.

13 His cheeks are like beds of spice
yielding perfume.
His lips are like lilies
dripping with myrrh.

14 His arms are rods of gold
set with chrysolite.
His body is like polished ivory
decorated with sapphires.

15 His legs are pillars of marble
set on bases of pure gold.
His appearance is like Lebanon,
choice as its cedars.

16 His mouth is sweetness itself;
he is altogether lovely.
This is my lover, this my friend,
O daughters of Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

9 The companions of the girl ask her about this man. What about him has reduced her to a state of illness? The question directly asks her to compare her lover with other lovers. One aspect of love in the Song of Songs is that of exclusivity, a principle that underpins the vignette. Her lover is unique, and he uniquely affects her. She attempts to explain it to the daughters of Jerusalem.

10 Earlier in the Song, the boy described the girl as a lily among thorns. Here the girl declares that the boy stands out among ten thousand; all others are insignificant. He is "radiant" (צַח), a term used in Isaiah 18:4, "*dazzling* heat in the sunshine," and in Jeremiah 4:11, "*scorching* wind." This sizzling phenomenon is how the boy affects the girl; he bedazzles and overheats her. He appears "blood red," an almost theophanic picture similar to Revelation 1:13 – 16 (see Note).The young man is larger than life.

Perhaps this is literary synaesthesia, the transfer of sensation from its usual-

sense modality to another modality. In this case, nonvisual stimulation may be sensed as the color red (chromaesthesia).The boy sets all of her senses on fire. In the next vignette, with similar language the boy compares the girl with the sun and the moon.

11 The modern reader should not rush through this poetry. Why is the man's head described as fine gold? The head of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2 was golden, in that case representing beauty and grandeur. By what sense are his locks like date panicles? Sight? Smell? Perhaps the softness of the flower reminds her of his hair. The comparison to a raven is expressly that of color.

12 – 15a The *was.f* derives images from artifice, i.e., here a statue seems to be described. His golden head, eyes mounted like jewels, arms of gold, and alabaster legs on a golden base seem to describe a sculpture or fabrication. The overall impression is one of strength, solidity, and immovability, with glory and magnificence. He shines like gold; his features bedazzle like jewels. He commands the girl's attention.

Intertwined with the statuesque imagery are figures more organic and lively (see comments on 1:15, where the girl's eyes are doves). Here more detail is given about the comparison. His eyes are doves by streams of water, washed in milk. Perhaps color is the point of comparison. His lips are as lilies. Again the reader must pause and consider. Do they look like lilies? Smell like lilies? Do they have petals?Perhaps they are soft to her touch. They flow with myrrh, as did the "fingers" of 4:5. When her face is close to his, she experiences his scent — "beds of balsam, towers of scented herbs."

The *wasf* begins with the man's head and works its way down to his "foundation," passing through face, hands, midriff, and legs. The midriff (glossed "body" in the NIV) is located between the upper body and the legs. Daniel 2:32 uses the Aramaic cognate, "Its *belly* and thighs were of bronze"; but the Hebrew word usually denotes "bowels" and is the same as in 5:4, "My *insides* surged upon him." It is glossed "womb" in Ruth 1:11, and except for here and Daniel 2:32, it always signifies internal organs.

The particular "intestine" in view in the Song is visible to the girl and is

compared to a “polished tusk encrusted with sapphires” (lit. trans.).The word “ivory” is in Hebrew “tooth” or “tusk”and connotes a tusklike appearance in 7:4, “a tower of ivory.” The most likely referent for the girl’s description here is the man’s penis, like a polished tusk. Later in the Song, another Hebrew word that usually signifies internal organs is used for the same visible region of the female body.

It is this kind of material in the Song of Songs that leads commentators to conclude that if the Song had been discovered outside of its canonical context, it would certainly have been read as a prurient love song. Imagine a clique of young single women listening to someone describe her infatuation detailing her boyfriend’s erection. The other girls are affected by this and desire to seek out this man also. Obviously, to read this section as an allegory of Christ and the church is to present to the reader’s imagination a disrespectful vision of Christ in the same sense that Ham disrespected his father (Ge 9:22 – 23). An allegorical reading of the Song of Songs is thus sacrilegious. The religious value of the Song is in its vision of sexuality that conceives God the Creator, who has put passion in the hearts of human beings — a passion that echoes the deeper passion for a love that satisfies and never ends (SS 8:6).

15b – 16 The *wasf* of 5:11 – 15a is bounded by an inclusio of the word *paz* (“fine gold,” only these two places in the Song). Before and after the *wasf* are general descriptions of his overall appearance; he is like choice cedars of Lebanon and able to cast his own Lebanese spell on the girl. She makes special mention of his “sweet palate.” In 2:3 his fruit was sweet to her palate. Here the note that his palate is “sweet” uses a word echoed in Proverb 9:17 in a sexual sense: “Stolen water is *sweet*.” She concludes, “He is entirely desirable.” This has its parallel in 4:7, where the boy claims that the girl has no flaw. In her mind, the lovesickness is certainly justifiable.

NOTES

9 The phrase reads literally, “What is your lover from a lover?”This is understood as a form of the superlative, “What distinguishes your lover from all other lovers (who are ordinary)?”

10 The NIV reads, "*Outstanding* among ten thousand," from *dāgûl*. Arguing from the Akkadian root *dagālu*, "look with astonishment," Gordis, 203, suggests, "distinguished among ten thousand."

The NIV translates אָדוֹם (*ʾādôm*, "bright red") as "ruddy." First Samuel 16:12 uses אַדְמוֹנִי (*ʾadmônî*, "reddish") to describe David. To the author's knowledge, the physiological phenomenon of synaesthesia was first associated with the Song in 1998 by Heidi Epstein at the Society of Biblical Literature's annual meeting.

11 – 15a Though beds of balsam and various birds and flowers are part of the *was.f*, its overall lineament seems to be of a graven image. Interpreters such as Meek (in his introduction to the Song of Songs in *IB*, 5:91 – 98) and Pope, who argue for the liturgical origin of the Song, note this fact. After all, the man is introduced with a blazing, semi-theophanic visage. But every *wasf* presents images that tease the mind; a prototypical idol is hardly necessary to posit. In 7:2 the girl's thighs are compared with a jeweler's handiwork. Landy, 80, has called the description "coldly metallic and disjointed."Yet the girl concludes her erotic *wasf* with a positive evaluation: "He is all desirable," and her companions are stirred to seek him out themselves.

14 *ʿešet*("polished"), from *ʿšt*, is found elsewhere only in Jeremiah 5:28, "they have grown fat and *sleek*." Perhaps it is a synonym for "fatness" and can be glossed "a thick tusk."

2. Where Has He Gone? (6:1 – 3)

1 Where has your lover gone,
most beautiful of women?
Which way did your lover turn,
that we may look for him with you?

2 My lover has gone down to his garden,
to the beds of spices,
to browse in the gardens
and to gather lilies.

3 I am my lover's and my lover is mine;
he browses among the lilies.

COMMENTARY

1 The girl has finished her *wasf* , and her companions have been moved to join her in her quest.They now desire to see this man for themselves!

2 After her nocturnal hunt, her molestation, her lovesickness, her charge to the companions, her titillating description of her lost love, and the friends' desire to look for him, some climactic reunion is expected as the climax to the vignette. Instead, the emotion is diffused; he is only gathering lilies. Elsewhere in the Song, to browse among lilies and to enter gardens is to enjoy lovemaking with one's beloved. There is no need to search; there is no tension. The Song seems to subvert itself. After creating such tension, the reader is left in the end with no satisfaction and the impression that all the ado has been about nothing. In this manner, the Song reveals that her inner life is full of fears and doubts even while her lover is entirely domesticated. Love is not an altogether positive experience in the Song.

3 For the second time in the Song the language of covenant appears: "I am my lover's and my lover is mine" (see comments on 2:16). It is precisely while in a covenantal relation to her lover that she imagines losing him, being punished by watchmen and being lovesick. Love creates an unsettled mind even when it pleases to be stirred.

NOTE

2 – 3 Landy, 202 – 3, claims that when her lover gathers lilies he is actually grazing among women: ". . . if he is hers," [illegible] how can he promiscuously graze among women? This is in fact a point of extreme tension in the Song." But 2:16 uses the same language with no such tension; the girl herself is the field of lilies in which he grazes. The verse should be read as synonymous parallelism, "I am my lover's and my lover is mine" = "He browses among the lilies."

J. Who Is This, as Awesome as an Army with Banners? (6:4 – 10)

OVERVIEW

The vignette opens and closes with the unique Hebrew phrase ,*ʾayummâ kannidgālôt* (lit., “terrible as an army with banners”; NIV, “majestic as troops with banners,” v.4; “majestic as stars in procession,” v.10). The boy’s description of the girl mirrors hers of him from the previous vignette; she is larger than life and unsettling to him. For the first time, the fabulous harem of Solomon is critiqued. The love celebrated and explored in the Song of Songs is set in contrast to that institution.This is another expression of the Song’s posture that love is exclusive.

The tiny *was f* associates this vignette with 4:1 – 7 and is in fact an abbreviated version of it.This vignette includes just enough of the first *was f* to invoke it all, then places it in an appropriate context. The setting for the *was f* is revealed as the opposite of the harem; the *was f* is a celebration of the other’s uniqueness.

The famous love of King Solomon for women that inspired the bloated harem is indirectly appraised and found lacking. It is unlikely that Solomon himself authored this critique, for that action would in effect be judging himself to have lost the essence of love.

4 You are beautiful, my darling, as Tirzah,
lovely as Jerusalem,
majestic as troops with banners.
5 Turn your eyes from me;
they overwhelm me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Gilead.
6 Your teeth are like a flock of sheep
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin,
not one of them is alone.
7 Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
8 Sixty queens there may be,
and eighty concubines,
and virgins beyond number;
9 but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favorite of the one who bore her.
The maidens saw her and called her blessed;

the queens and concubines praised her.

10 Who is this that appears like the dawn,
fair as the moon, bright as the sun,
majestic as the stars in procession?

COMMENTARY

4a The girl is compared to the beauty of two cities: Tirzah, the capital of the northern kingdom from the schism until Omri, and Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom. Though the use of both cities may indicate authorship during the united kingdom, it is also possible that the dual status as centers of government indicates an authorship of this vignette sometime between Jeroboam and Omri, or perhaps afterward when a southern poet would have eschewed the later capital, Samaria.

"Tirzah" (*tirṣâ*) is from the root *rs.h* (GK 8354), "pleasing." Jerusalem is "the perfection of beauty"(La 2:15; cf. Ps 50:2). It is notable that the girl is compared to the beauty of these cities. A beautiful city implies fine architecture, pleasing landscape, an interesting layout, and cleanliness. As these cities are pleasing to many senses, so the girl pleases the boy; but a city is not graceful or feminine. It has no smile, is not soft to the touch, is not fair of face. It can be grand and awe-inspiring, especially if seen from ground level before its defensive walls. The girl is later compared to a defensive fortress (SS 7:4;8:10), and perhaps it is the cities' imposing quality in view here.

4b The word "dreadful, majestic," or "awesome"(*dgl*), is found outside the Song only in Habakkuk 1:7, where it describes the fearsome and dreaded onslaught of the oncoming Chaldean military.A closely related word is found in Deuteronomy 32:25, glossed "terror." The girl is an "army with banners" bearing down on the boy and inspiring trepidation.

5a This trepidation causes the boy to cry out for her to turn her alarming eyes from him. *Rhb* ("overwhelm") is used in Proverbs 6:3 in the sense "harrass" or "importune" one's creditor. Rahab is the aquatic monster that churns up the sea (Ps 87:4;Isa 51:9). In a moment of self-protection, the boy implores the girl to spare him. In the Song of Songs, this seems to be the male equivalent of lovesickness;he is helplessly in her power.

5b – 7 These lines repeat the *was.f* of 4:1 – 5 but are limited to her hair and face and omit her lips.The new aspect of the *was.f* is its immediate context between the cry of the boy and women's praise.Against the backdrop of many queens and concubines, she singularly overwhelms the boy. The genre of the *was.f* is specifically placed in a literary context that precludes any reading other than one that celebrates the unparalleled love of the one for the other.

8 The vignette abruptly shifts from the *was.f* genre to a delineation of the multiplicity of inamoratas of various sexual affiliations with the court. There are sixty queens, the same number as the warriors who defended the apparatus of the throne in 3:7."Queens" refers to the regular wives of the king, who enjoyed higher status than concubines. There is an increasing numerical gradient as the sexual relationship becomes more peripheral: sixty wives, eighty concubines, numberless maidens. The maidens are found elsewhere in the Song only in 1:3, in a royal context; they love the king for his name and oil. First Kings 11:3 ascribes three hundred concubines to Solomon. The harem is the foil against which the girl is measured.

9a In juxtaposition with the characterization of the three-tiered seraglio is the thrice-blessed peerless girl. She is neither royal wife nor concubine nor maiden; she belongs in no category with these paramours. In place of *sixty* wives is "my dove, my perfect *one*"; of *eighty* concubines is "*unique*, the only daughter of her mother"; of *countless* maidens is "*favorite* of the one who bore her." In each iteration the numeral "one" (and its substitute in the third case, "favorite") is in the emphatic position.In the sixty, eighty, numberless business of royal consorts, the girl whose eyes affect the boy is one, one, one.

9b – 10 The vignette began with the boy's exclamation that she is "terrible as an army with banners"and closes the inclusio with the female courtesans repeating the same phrase (see Overview of 8:4 – 10).The "daughters" (i.e., "maidens") bless her (,*šr*) and the others praise her (ʾšr) These terms describe the virtuous wife in Proverbs 31:28.

The opening compared the girl to metropolitan images, the ending to astronomical images. She "appears [looks forth]" like the dawn. The word signifies gazing from an elevated position, such as a window (2Ki 9:30) or

heaven (Ps 14:2). As the dawn surveys the landscape, so the girl views the world.She is fair as the moon,“bright” as the sun. “Bright”uses the same word as “favorite” in the preceding verse. Her beauty shines on the world.

“Who is this?” the ladies ask (v.10). Previously the question was asked in the context of a royal procession that featured Solomon with his crown (3:6). Here the question is asked against the backdrop of Solomon’s many women. The aspect of love presented in this vignette is its quality. As love becomes more peripheral, the number of women in their respective categories increases to infinity. The opposite is also true. As love becomes more central, the number of women in the category decreases. When the number of women to love decreases to only one, the degree of love grows exponentially to cosmic proportions.

NOTES

4a The Old Greek translates Tirzah as εὐδοκία (*eudokia*, “delight, pleasing”), from its root רצה(GK 8354), “fair as pleasure, beautiful as Jerusalem.” Note the similar misunderstanding in 4:8.

4b From the Akkadian root *dagālu*, Gordis, 204, translates “these great sights.” The alternative is to read the Niphal participle, “ones with banners,” along with the use of the verb in Psalm 20:5, “we will lift up our banners.”

5a Pope, 564 – 65, translates *hihbūnī*as “drive me wild,” denoting sexual excitement.

5b Compare *min-haggilʿād,* “from Gilead,” with 4:1, *mēhar gilʿād,* “Mount Gilead.”

9a *Bārā*(GK 1338), “favorite,” is in the next verse a quality of the sun and is usually rendered “pure” or “clean” (in a moral sense, see Job 11:4; Ps 24:4); “where there are no oxen the stall is *clean*” (Pr 14:4).The verb is glossed “choice, elect” in Nehemiah 5:18. Here the word is a virtual synonym with the numeral. “My dove, my perfect one,” is a term of endearment used in 5:2.

10b The moon is literally “white one” and the sun is literally “hot one.” These

are also paired in Isaiah 24:23; 30:26. In the context *dgl* could then be rendered "astronomical sights," or as in the NIV, "stars in procession."

K. Let Us See Whether the Vine Has Budded (There I Will Give You My Love) (6:11 – 7:12 [13])

OVERVIEW

At this point the macrostructure of the Song of Songs begins to become harder to discern. The twice-repeated reference to the vine and pomegranates budding and blossoming (6:11; 7:12) is the last major inclusio. Unlike the other major inclusios, however, the bounded material does not share a common motif or perspective. It is difficult to organize the remainder of the Song into vignettes. As love itself spins out of human control, so the Song of Songs defies rational explanation.

The fourth and final *was.f* is found in this vignette, uniquely moving from the feet to the head. There also seems to be a deliberate reference to judgment on women in Genesis 3:16; in the context of love, the judgment is turned upside down. When the boy simply delights in the charms of the girl, he does not mind being captivated by her.

1. Looking for Signs of Spring (6:11 – 13 [7:1])

11 I went down to the grove of nut trees
to look at the new growth in the valley,
to see if the vines had budded
or the pomegranates were in bloom.
12 Before I realized it,
my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people.
13 Come back, come back, O Shulammite;
come back, come back, that we may gaze on you!
Why would you gaze on the Shulammite
as on the dance of Mahanaim?

COMMENTARY

11 The girl muses whether the signs of spring are apparent. The seasonal aspect of love again nuances her search. Has the time for love arrived?In the words of 2:11, is the winter past and the rain over and gone? Have the vines budded or the pomegranates bloomed? The significance of her search for efflorescence is not revealed until 7:12.The time of maturity is the season for love.

12 Literally this verse reads, “I did not know, my soul set me from/upon the chariots of my noble people.” The girl may be daydreaming. She certainly is the center of attention in the next verse. If she is daydreaming about being placed upon a royal chariot, then her musing may continue through the *was.f* of the next section, since the only other use of *nādîb*(“noble”) is found in the opening verse of 7:1, where she is called a “*prince’s* daughter.”

13a [7:1a] This is the only verse in the Song of Songs that uses the feminine form of the word Solomon to designate the girl: *šûlammît*. Perhaps the epithet signifies nobility or royalty and should be translated “princess.” The appellation belongs uniquely to this section of the Song. To identify the girl as the *šûlammît* throughout the whole Song is to flatten the Song’s multiform character. In 4:8 – 5:1 she is his “sister bride,” in 3:1 – 4 he is “the one for whom my soul longs,” and in this verse, and perhaps this vignette, she is the *šûlammît*.

The Hebrew is ambiguous as to whether she is being implored to return or to pirouette — “Turn around, turn around!” In either case, the girl has captured the crowd’s attention, even if only in her imagination.

13b [7:1b] The girl teases and asks the crowd why they gape as though she were performing *le pas des Mahanaim*. The etymology of “Mahanaim” is “Two Camps” (Ge 32:2; cf. 2Sa 17:24), which associates the girl’s dance with the prospect of war. She stupefies like an army with banners (cf. SS 6:4).

NOTES

12 Falk, 41, leaves the verse untranslated. Fox, 205 – 6, pronounces it “untranslatable” and emends to *šāmtanî mirkebet ʿim nāḏîḇ*,“You have put me on a chariot with

a nobleman," i.e., he makes her feel like nobility. In contrast, M. Deckers ("The Structure of the Song of Songs and the Centrality of *nepes*," in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. A. Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 194) translates with the MT,"I don't know / my being determines me / vehicle of my noble people," and claims that this is the pivotal verse in the poem. Raymond J. Tournay ("Les Chariots d'Aminadab [Cant 6:12]: Israël, Peuple Théophore,'" *VT* 9 [1959]: 267) argues that the phrase *ʿammî-nādîb* is a purposeful modification of the name Abinadab, just as was changed from Shunamite. He sees these alterations as part of the allegorical intention of the poet to review the history of David and Solomon, who knew Abishag the Shunamite and transferred the ark to the house of Abinadab.

13a [7:1a] Leo W. Schwartz ("On Translating the Song of Songs," *Judaism* 13 [Winter 1964]: 71) reads שׁוּב (šûb), (*šûb*), "Turn, turn around." The *hallammît* has the definite article and thus is not a proper name. Along with the name "Solomon," the epithet is derived from *šlm.* The Song of Songs ends with the girl finding *šālôm* with her lover in 8:10. It is less likely that the term refers to Abishag of 1Kings 1:3, 15; 2:17 – 22.

2. How Fair You Are (7:1 – 6 [7:2 – 7])

1 How beautiful your sandaled feet,
O prince's daughter!
Your graceful legs are like jewels,
the work of a craftsman's hands.

2 Your navel is a rounded goblet
that never lacks blended wine.
Your waist is a mound of wheat
encircled by lilies.

3 Your breasts are like two fawns,
twins of a gazelle.

4 Your neck is like an ivory tower.
Your eyes are the pools of Heshbon
by the gate of Bath Rabbim.
Your nose is like the tower of Lebanon
looking toward Damascus.

5 Your head crowns you like Mount Carmel.
Your hair is like royal tapestry;
the king is held captive by its tresses.

6 How beautiful you are and how pleasing,

O love, with your delights!

COMMENTARY

1 [2] The phrase “How beautiful” opens and closes this *was.f* and bounds it as a unit. This is the last *was.f* in the Song and uniquely proceeds from the feet to the head. That Ezekiel 16:10 – 12 also linearly traces the bride’s beauty from her sandaled feet to her crowned head suggests that the *was.f* of the vignette may be intimate speech spoken by her lover rather than the continuing ribald cries of the gaping throng.

Here, her feet are beautiful in what may be dancing shoes. Perhaps as a synonym to šālammôt, she is identified as the “prince’s daughter.” Her thighs are finely worked jewels. This identification echoes 5:10 – 15, where her lover is described in statuesque terms. The highlighted feature is the curvature of her sculpted thighs.

2a [3a] The next item on the list, šārōk, is traditionally glossed “your navel.” The word is a *hapax legomenon* and so has no context outside of this verse. Since the *was.f* traces a linear path, it is to be expected that the body part in question is situated between the girl’s thighs and her “belly.” The navel is out of place. Her vulva is the logical candidate — a round goblet never lacking in delectable moisture.To sing the praises of her vulva again reminds the reader of 5:14, where the girl celebrated the boy’s loins in her *was.f*.

2b [3b] In 5:14 a word that usually signifies the “intestines” or “womb” was used to designate the man’s penis. Here a word that elsewhere in the Bible always refers to internal organs, the “womb” or “stomach,” is used to stand for the pubic region, specifically the *mons veneris*, a “mound of wheat encircled by lilies.”

3 [4] In language identical with that of 4:5 (see comments), the girl’s breasts are again compared with twin gazelles. Since the image is not visual (her breasts presumably do not look like bovidae), other senses and perspectives must be employed to find the similarity. Perhaps her breasts are soft or gracefully in motion.

4 [5] Meyers, 213 – 15, finds martial imagery in the next comparisons. Her neck is likened to a military installation, a tower like a tusk of ivory.Her nose is an outpost that monitors Damascus, a military threat in Solomon's time. Her eyes are the tactically advantageous pools of Heshbon by the gate of Bath-Rabbim, part of the city's defenses.These images highlight the formidable presence of the lady. She is best approached with caution.

5a [6a] Carmel is the high mountain range running into the Mediterranean. Its equation with the girl's head may suggest grandeur, majesty, loftiness.Like any mountain range, Carmel can appear purple from a distance. The heaviness of the imagery here appropriately follows the formidability of the previous verse. Each image is weightier than the last.The picture of the lady is developed until it reaches its climax in the following statement concerning her effect on the king.

5b – 6 [6b – 7] ,*sr* is glossed "held captive" and indicates the confining of prisoners (Ge 39:20;40:3, 5). Unlike Isaiah 49:9, which announced to the prisoners "Come out!" and "Be free," the Song declares, "You will be bound!" "You will be enslaved!" Not even the king can be free from the captivity of love. The word "king" is rare in the Song, and its use here indicates that love transcends any power; before the charms of the formidable lady the otherwise sovereign ruler is held fast and helpless.

The *was.f* closes with a general comment on the girl's desirability. It is because she is so delightful that she captivates the king. The *was.f* crescendos with the subjugated sovereign pleased to be so.

NOTES

1 [2] The word translated "graceful" in the NIV is *hammûḡ,*' "turnings, curves," a *hapax legomenon* from חמק (*ḥmḡ*), translated "left" in 5:6.

2a [3a] שָׁרְרֵךְ (*šarrēk,* "your navel") is a *hapax legomenon*. Possible cognates include שֹׁר (*šōr*) from Ezekiel 16:4, "umbilical cord," and שָׁרִיר (*šārîr*) from Job 40:16, which can be glossed "loins." (Proverbs 3:8 is ambiguous.) The Arabic *sirr* can

mean “coitus.” As a vessel of juice, the vulva is a more likely candidate than the navel. Murphy, 182, translates, “your valley.”

4 [5] Athalya Brenner (“Come Back, Come Back, the Shulammite [Song of Songs 7:1 – 10]: A Parody of the Wasf Genre,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. A. Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 235) finds here an anti-*was.f*, an unflattering picture of an obese dancer. She notes its departure from the head-to-toe convention, its immodesty, and its bizarre distortion of the nose and head. She also (“A Note on *bat-rabbîm* [Song of Songs VII 5],” *VT* 42 [1992]: 115) argues that “the pools of Heshbon” were turbid and emends Bat-Rabbîm (an otherwise unknown locale) to Bat-Rabbah, the Ammonite capital.

But the only other full-bodied *was.f* in the Song is just as immodest; Ezekiel 16:10 – 13 (which is certainly not ribald humor) also vectors from foot to head; and bizarre imagery is the genre’s stock in trade. No doubt, the pools convey adulatory qualities. Perhaps they sparkled; perhaps they are part of the *was.f* ’s military imagery.

5 [6] *bāthāṯîm* (from *rahaṭ*), “by [its] tresses,” is rare (only Ge 30:38, 41; Ex 2:16), elsewhere glossed “watering trough.” Oddly, both instances have sexual contexts. The Aramaic cognate means “run.” The girl’s hair seems to be compared to running water.

6 [7] Although the LXX, Vulgate, and Peshitta all translate as a vocative, אַהֲבָה (*ʾahᵉbâ*; NIV, “O love”) is not used elsewhere in the Song as an epithet for the boy or girl. It may be read, “How pleasing you are in the delights of love,” or “There is nothing so fair and pleasant as love.” Pope, 593, adds a second t to תַּעֲנוּגִים (*taʿᵃnûgîm*) and reads “daughter of delights.”

3. I Am My Lover’s and His Desire Is for Me (7:7 – 10 [7:8 – 11])

7 Your stature is like that of the palm,
and your breasts like clusters of fruit.
8 I said, “I will climb the palm tree;
I will take hold of its fruit.”
May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine,
the fragrance of your breath like apples,

9 and your mouth like the best wine.
May the wine go straight to my lover,
flowing gently over lips and teeth.
10 I belong to my lover,
and his desire is for me.

COMMENTARY

7 – 9a [8 – 10a] The boy compares the girl's stature to a palm tree and her breasts to its fruit. The fruit is not easily reachable; to enjoy its clusters one must first climb the tree. The boy intends to climb the tree to take hold of its fruit. In other words, his intention is to climb the girl and take hold of her breasts. The word "take hold" is from the Hebrew ,ḥz, elsewhere glossed "*catch* the little foxes," and "I *held* him and would not let him go." After mounting the palm tree, he will vigorously denude its fruit.He hopes her breasts and kisses will be intoxicating like the fruit of the vine, and that when he is close enough he will discover her scent to be pleasing.

9b [10a] The girl delights in his designs and expresses her desire to see that his foretastes are not disappointed.

10 [11] The Song uses tᵉšûqâ(GK 9592),"desire,"elsewhere found only in Genesis 3:16, "To your man is your tᵉšûqâ and he will rule over you," and in 4:7, "To you is its tᵉšûqâ and you should rule over it."Sin's desire is for the man as the woman's desire is for her husband, and the man is to master it and rule her.In both verses the issue is mastery and desire. In the Song the girl says, "His tᵉšûqâis for me . . ." and to the reader acquainted with Genesis the thought begs to be completed, ".. . and I will master him." This follows a *was.f* that treats the girl with military imagery culminating with the king's being in her power.

If the use of tᵉšûqâis an intentional commentary on the judgment of Genesis 3:16, the Song demonstrates that in love the judgment is mitigated and is not the last word on relationships. Throughout Genesis, women are seen using sex to get what they want from men (Lot and his daughters, Leah and Jacob,Tamar and Judah). In each case, the man's desire was for the woman; they did not know what has happening to them, and the women consequently bested them.The judgment of Genesis 3:16 is not the last word on the subject of male – female

relations in Genesis; women have power over men invested in their femininity.

What is in the sphere of power plays, manipulation, and deception in Genesis becomes in the Song of Songs a delightful aspect of love. The king is happy to be captivated by her; his desire is for her, while she celebrates, “I belong to him.”

NOTES

7 [8] The initial זֹאת “*This*, your stature, is like a palm tree,” often indicates the beginning of a new section.

8a [9a] In the NIV, in 7:7 her breasts are “fruit” (בְּטָנֵךְ) and in 7:8 he will seize the “fruit” (*sansan*). Though in Hebrew they are different words, the sense is correct. בְּטָנֵךְis later recapitulated in 7:8, “May your breasts be like the *clusters*.” The boy claims, “I will climb עָלָה the palm tree!” In Genesis 31:10 – 12,עָלָהsignifies mating.

8b [9a] The girl’s “nose” or “breath” אַפֵּךְ(GK 678) is like apples. Mitchell Dahood (“Canticle 7:9 and UT 52:61: A Question of Method,” *Bib* 57 [1976]: 109) argues from the Ugaritic phrase *ap dd,* “the nipple of the breast,” that the אַפֵּךְ continues the thought of the verse. Thus the boy puts a fine point on his wish. Pope, 636, identifies the אַפֵּךְwith the Ugaritic entrance to the city gate in the Aqhat epic and translates, “The scent of your vulva like apples.”

9 [10] Literally, the girl’s speech reads,“Going to my lover smoothly, trickling over the lips of the sleepers.” לְמֵישָׁרִים,“smoothly,” follows Proverbs 23:31, “wine . . . goes down *smoothly*” (see the note on 1:4b). דּוֹבֵב is a *hapax legomenon*, perhaps a derivation of the Aramaic *dwb* or the Hebrew cognate *zwb*, “flow.”The latter is the common designator for semen in Leviticus.

If the initial *yod* of יְשֵׁנִים (*yĕšēnîm*) were changed to *waw* and the final *mem* were enclitic, the text would read “my lips and my teeth.” The Old Greek,Vulgate, and Peshitta support this reading. The other occurrence of a sleeper in the Song is in 5:2. There the girl is stirred in an emotional dream that is pregnant with double

entendre and erotic imagery.

4. Let Us Look for Signs of Spring (7:11 – 12 [7:12 – 13])

11 Come, my lover, let us go to the countryside,
let us spend the night in the villages.
12 Let us go early to the vineyards
to see if the vines have budded,
if their blossoms have opened,
and if the pomegranates are in bloom —
there I will give you my love.

COMMENTARY

11 – 12 [12 – 13] This small piece recalls the seasonal motif of the opening lines, thus closing the inclusio. The boy is invited to “spend the night,”with the phrase using a word found in the Song elsewhere only in 1:13, “my lover is to me a sachet of myrrh *resting* between my breasts.” The girl desires to inspect the vines to see if the spring has arrived. There she will give him her love.

The vignette closes with her promise, yet without allowing the reader to know whether the spring has come. Has it? Have the pomegranates blossomed? Has the time for love arrived? Only the couple knows.

NOTE

11 – 12 [12 – 13] There are two terms unique in the Song to these verses and in 6:11: גֹּפֶר “bud,” and סְמָדַר. “bloom.”These serve as an inclusio to bind the vignette together.

L. Oh, That You Were Like a Brother to Me! (7:13 – 8:4 [7:14 – 8:4])

OVERVIEW

This is the fourth and last vignette ending in an adjuration; once more the girl implores her companions not to arouse love until it pleases (8:4). In 3:1 – 4, the girl sought her beloved in the city streets, only to find him and cling to him until she had secured him in her uterus. Only then would she relax her grip. That vignette is revisited in 5:2 – 8, where the girl failed to find her beloved and was left languishing and lovesick. In the vignette below, again the girl muses of finding her beloved in the street — but this time it is entirely in the realm of daydream, with the seek-and-find formula in the optative mood.

The conception that love can bring derision is introduced. This vignette is similar to 1:5 – 8 in portraying the immature yearnings of a girl inexperienced in love. Love is not an entirely pleasant experience. The girl is infatuated; her daydream drifts into an erotic fantasy before the cautionary word is issued. Beware love, says the Song of Songs, for one smitten will ache with longing — a longing that cannot be fulfilled without the community's censure.

1. If Only You Were Mine (7:13 – 8:3 [7:14 – 8:3])

13 The mandrakes send out their fragrance,
and at our door is every delicacy,
both new and old,
that I have stored up for you, my lover.

8:1 If only you were to me like a brother,
who was nursed at my mother's breasts!
Then, if I found you outside,
I would kiss you,
and no one would despise me.

2 I would lead you
and bring you to my mother's house —
she who has taught me.
I would give you spiced wine to drink,
the nectar of my pomegranates.

3 His left arm is under my head
and his right arm embraces me.

COMMENTARY

13 [14] This verse either belongs to the previous vignette, opens the present

vignette, or stands on its own as a fragment. It seems to invoke the domestic life of the girl and yield insight into her inner world, the things she stores as treasure for the day she can share them with her lover. Imagining her home, she “hid” for him pleasant things new and old. In the verses that follow, however, it is clear that he is not yet hers.

8:1 If the boy of her fancy were her brother, she could greet him in the street with a friendly kiss; but he is not, so such behavior would bring scorn on her.This dovetails with the family’s anger of 1:6 and the punishing watchmen of 5:7. The disdain of the family and the community for unbecoming conduct is part of the experience of love in the Song of Songs.One does not love in a vacuum; it is not merely a matter of the two alone. Love and scorn are sociologically linked. Of course, the variety of kiss she would render to a kinsman is not what she would to her lover.The language here echoes that in Proverbs 7:13, “She took hold of him and kissed him.”

2a Her reverie surrenders to concupiscence. She imagines taking charge of the boy, driving him to her uterus, recapitulating the act of her own conception (see comments and note on 3:4). The verbs “bring” and “drink” are in the causative stem in Hebrew, thus emphasizing her initiative. *tlammedēnî*can be read as a third person feminine, “she will teach me,” or second person masculine, “you will teach me.” Either translation is defensible.

2b Throughout the Song of Songs,Bible translators err on the side of modesty.When the Hebrew seems to indicate genitalia, the English versions gloss with nonsexual language. The “loins” of 5:14 and “vulva” and “*mons* ” of 7:2 (also “nipple” of 7:8) are the chief examples. In contrast to this, though the Hebrew is clearly singular, translators gloss “pomegranates,”thus casting the fruit as an image of her breasts. But the girl’s luscious mouth is the likely referent (see the note on 4:3b). She causes the boy to drink of her pomegranate.The scenario has moved from a peck in public to a deep kiss in her bedchamber.

3 Her wishful thinking hastens from the kiss to the copulatory embrace. At this point, the accelerating libidinal fantasy is suddenly interrupted. Instead of reaching a climax, the text breaks off into a warning about love (see comments on 2:6 – 7).

NOTES

13 [14] *dûdā'îm,* "mandrakes," is similar to "my lover," *dôdî,* and *dodîm,* "breasts." Mandrakes are associated with coitus in Genesis 30:14 – 16 and were regarded as an aphrodisiac.

8:1 The expression reads literally, "Who will give you as a brother to me?" — an expression of the opta-tive mood, "If only you were my brother."

2a "I would lead you" (from נהג, *nhg*) usually means "lead" or "drive" a people or an army (Ge 31:18;

1Ch 20:1; Isa 20:4). This vignette repeats in abbreviated form several previous lines in the Song. In 3:4, the "house of my mother" is described as the girl's uterus (see note on 3:4).To read *tĕlammĕdēnî* as "you would teach me" does not insert the mother into the action (as the NIV translation does) and is consistent with the syntactically identical word of 8:3, "you would embrace me." It has the disadvantage of giving the boy an active role; it is difficult to imagine this young lady needing direction in the ways of love.

2. Adjuration to Beware of Love (8:4)

4 Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you:
Do not arouse or awaken love
until it so desires.

COMMENTARY

4 Like a literary *coitus interruptus* , the charge of the Song of Songs intrudes on the erotic vignette, thus preventing the interpreter from reading it as entirely positive. There is a price tag attached to love that involves much wishful thinking, discontentment with present circumstances, and ungratified physical attraction. To love is to yearn, to love is to fantasize, to love is to be dissatisfied.The Song of Songs highlights this aspect of love and challenges the

reader to consider it.

NOTE

4 This verse is an abbreviated form of the refrain in 2:7, and the phrase “by the gazelles and by the does of the field” is present in ellipsis. By this point in the Song, the object of the oath is understood.

M. Who is This, Coming Up from the Desert? (8:5 – 7)

OVERVIEW

This vignette compares love to the most voracious forces in human life: death and the grave.Its unique vocabulary and patterning bring the Song to its climactic perspective and unveil a new dimension to love. Love is conceptualized as an unquenchable fire greater and more powerful than the lovers themselves.

The vignette begins with a picture of love’s arousal, then moves to the ultimate desire in the human heart — the love for which lovers long.The previous vignette showed a girl yearning for a love that she did not have; this vignette explores the yearning that lovers have for a love that never ends, a love that satisfies. The last word on the subject is the brief recall of the theme introduced in 8:1, namely, the linkage between love and the derision of the community. Love is a raging inferno that could consume the lover’s house and leave him with nothing.

1. Love and Death (8:5 – 7a)

5 Who is this coming up from the desert
leaning on her lover?
Under the apple tree I roused you;
there your mother conceived you, there she who was in labor gave you birth.

6 Place me like a seal over your heart,
like a seal on your arm;
for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
7 Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.

COMMENTARY

5a For the second time, a vignette opens with the line, “Who is this coming up from the desert?”In 3:6 the line continues to describe the procession of Solomon; here the royal promenade is transformed into the solitary stroll of the couple, with no ceremonial elegance or splendor. The wedding of the great king is reenacted in the passion of the twosome; the kingly celebration serves as exemplar for all lovemaking. The girl leans on her lover, then asks to be set as a seal on the boy. She wants to be his; she desires no autonomy.

5b The Hebrew is a triad of three words each:

Under	the-apple-tree	I-aroused-you
There	strained-for-you	your-mother
There	strained-for-you	she-bore-you

The three verbs seem to set parallel the girl’s sexual stimulation of the boy, the orgasmic writhing of his mother when he was conceived, and the writhing of her parturiency. Arousal and conception involve physical contortions equated with giving birth. Every aspect of how sexual intercourse physically wrenches the body is summarized. She rouses the boy immediately after she charges her friends not to rouse love. This paradox leads to the Song’s strongest reflections on love’s consuming power.

This is another problematic verse from an allegorical standpoint. If it speaks of Yahweh and Israel, who is Yahweh’s mother?

6a The signet ring or seal in Scripture signifies a public commitment to

comply with a treaty or promise. After Judah impregnated Tamar, she exacted his signet to guarantee his pledge (Ge 38:18). The seal is also closely related to the idea of identity (Ex 28:11, 36; Jer 22:24); a person as a seal is a common metaphor in the Bible. To be imprinted as a seal on another is to be inseparable from that person. She wishes his life to be hers, to be derivative, since love is strong as death.

In the Song, jealousy is a synonym for love.Yahweh is a “consuming fire/a jealous God” (Dt 4:24).Jealousy is as fierce as Sheol in its pursuits. Love/ jealousy is like death and the grave in sharing their strength and stubbornness. Sheol’s appetite cannot be assuaged; its mouth has no limit; it consumes the world and is not filled (Pr 27:20; Isa 5:14; Hab 2:4).Sheol, like the barren womb, never says, “Enough!”(Pr 30:16). Love/jealousy is a sealed passion that allows no mollification. Lovers are defenseless when in its grasp.

6b The last word of the verse is *šalhebetyâ,* “mighty flame.” The shortened form of the divine name is suffixed (as in “Hallelu-*jah*”) and read as a superlative. Some English versions read “the flame of the LORD.” In D. W. Thomas’s study of superlatives (209 – 24), every case of the divine name so used retained a religious significance. The superlative degree does not exhaust the meaning of the word; something about Yahweh makes it the greatest flame. Love, like God, is a consuming fire.

Paul says that it is better to marry than to burn (1Co 7:9, 38). Proverbs 6:27 – 34 warns about love and jealousy in similar language:

> Can a man scoop fire into his lap
> without his clothes being burned?
> Can a man walk on hot coals
> without his feet being scorched?
> So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife;
> no one who touches her will go unpunished.
> Men do not despise a thief if he steals
> to satisfy his hunger when he is starving.
> Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold,
> though it costs him all the wealth of his
> house.
> But a man who commits adultery lacks

judgment;
whoever does so destroys himself.
Blows and disgrace are his lot,
and his shame will never be wiped away;
for jealousy arouses a husband's fury,
and he will show no mercy when he takes
revenge.

7a The property that equates fire with death and Sheol is here revealed to be its unstoppable character; love is a fire that cannot be doused. Ordinary fires are extinguishable and only extraordinary conflagrations can traverse rivers; but love-fire yields to no power and cannot be quenched.Thus love is not only as strong as death, but also it triumphs when death threatens to extinguish love.

NOTES

5 רפק (*rpq*) is a *hapax legomenon* but is known in late Hebrew and cognates. חבל (*ḥbl*) and its derivatives can mean "be pregnant" (Ps 7:14), "fetus" (Job 39:3), "travail" (Isa 13:8), "engender" (Ps 2:7), or "conceive" (Ge 4:1). The gloss "strain" attempts to capture some similarity between the act of conception and parturition.

6 William W. Hallo ("For Love is Strong as Death," *JNES* 22 [1993]: 45 – 50) argues that the girl wants the status of funeral objects, i.e., to rest with him in the grave. Dianne Bergant ("My Beloved Is Mine and I Am His (Song 2:16): The Song of Songs and Honor and Shame," *Semeia* 68 [1994]: 32) sees their love as a force contending with death and Sheol. Some commentators read "jealousy" as "ardor" or "passion," thus avoiding a negative nuance.

In Hebrew literature, מות (*môt*, GK 4637) can express the superlative: Samson was vexed unto death. Thomas, 223, suggests "love is extremely strong," in place of "love is strong as death," and "jealousy is hellishly cruel." Numbers 5:11 – 31 describes the ordeal of jealousy in the case of a man who suspects his wife of infidelity.

7a In Scripture, רבים (*mayim rab*m*bîm*, "many waters") occurs twenty-nine

times. Often the phrase refers to the life-threatening waters that menace the created order (Ps 77:19; Eze 26:19; Hab 3:15), or it symbolizes dangers (2Sa 22:15 – 17; Pss 18:17; 144:7; Isa 17:13).This phrase may draw on imagery from the Ugaritic mythological battles of Baal, Mot, Yam, and judge Nahar.

REFLECTION

The Song of Songs first compares love to death in its tenacity. Then, in a startling display of hyperbole, the Song argues in the image of the inferno that nothing at all can overflow love. This love, in this image that puts into words the lover's yearning for a never-ending love, of necessity requires the invocation of Yahweh. The only love that truly transcends death and that is not smothered is the love of God in Christ. Jesus rose from the dead and will return for his people. Thus every Christian possesses the substance of the Love behind all loves celebrated in the Song of Songs, just as lovers image this love and enjoy a foretaste of it in their lovemaking (see comments on 3:11).

This is why the Song never uses the terminology of satisfaction (see comments on 5:1b). Satisfying love is the Love that never ends, that transcends death, that is sealed on one's body and soul forever. Satisfying love is the Love that death and the grave will not conquer in the end. His tomb is empty, and Love guarantees that someday the reader's will be also.

2. Love and Pauperization (8:7b)

7b If one were to give
all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned.

COMMENTARY

7b Three approaches are possible: the man would be scorned if he tried to buy love; the wealth itself would be scorned; or love would be the only valid reason for which a man may imperil his fortune ("If a man were to give all of the wealth of his house for love, would he be entirely despised?" Pope, 676).See Proverbs

6:30 – 31 (above).

The overriding value of love over the treasure of a house is the core interpretation with which all three readings agree. The specter of a man's hazarding poverty for love is raised. Wisdom brings wealth (Pr 8:18), but love can bring anti-wealth.

As the girl in 8:1 considered the scorn of the community, the same scorn is at issue when the claims of love conflict with normal behavior.Sacrificing one's wealth for love is as outlandish as running through the dark city streets to find one's lover.

The vignette began with the girl's identity lost to the boy, and it ends with the boy's being prepared to lose everything for love and perhaps gain only scorn. Love is like death and the grave, and no ransom can free a man from it.

NOTE

7b The only instance of the intensifying infinitive in the Song is "utterly scorned." Raymond J. Tournay ("The Song of Songs and its Concluding Section [8:1 – 7]," trans. D. Meisels, *Immanuel* 10 [1980]: 12 – 13) argues for the unity of 8:1 – 7 from a number of common words, as *ntn*, *byt*, [illegible] and [illegible].

N. Solomon, You Can Keep Your Silver (8:8 – 12)

OVERVIEW

The Song of Songs climaxed in the previous vignette by unveiling the transcendent dimension of the Love that stands behind all loves. Even lovers yearn for a love that truly satisfies. Here the anthology closes by recapitulating the opening vignette, which remembered a time when the girl was under the discipline of her brothers. Here a picture of that time is revisited. In the

beginning of the Song, the girl chafed under this preparation and complained that she had no vineyard of her own. In the end, the girl finally possesses her vineyard.

Two aspects of love are presented here. First, the way to peace is through virtue, through being a fortress in one's youth. Second, the love between one virtuous girl and her singular lover is superior to that possessed by Solomon, with his bureaucratic love enterprise. Solomon's bloated harem is nothing to envy and is not representative of the love celebrated in the Song of Songs. It is on this note that the anthology of songs ends.

1. Reminiscence (8:8 – 10)

8 We have a young sister,
and her breasts are not yet grown.
What shall we do for our sister
for the day she is spoken for?
9 If she is a wall,
we will build towers of silver on her.
If she is a door,
we will enclose her with panels of cedar.
10 I am a wall,
and my breasts are like towers.
Thus I have become in his eyes
like one bringing contentment.

COMMENTARY

8 As in 1:6, the girl remembers a time when she was subject to her family. Her brothers discuss the disposition of the immature girl. In 1:6 they were angry with her and restricted her. Here they discuss how they will handle her; they think ahead to the day when she is "spoken for," i.e., when the time comes for suitors, for love, for marriage (1Sa 25:39b).

9 The family envisions two possibilities: she may become a "wall" or a "door" (see Note). The metaphor of the wall recalls the military imagery of 4:4 and 7:4 (see comments on these verses). She may be a fortress, a tower bedecked with shields, a military stronghold that a man dare not approach without fearing for

his life. Alternatively, she may be a door, a structure designed for entry — the opposite function of a wall.

If the girl behaves as a wall, the family plans to adorn her accordingly, to add to her fortified glory “battlements of silver.” If she is a door, however — if she poses no threat to would-be suitors (why were they angry in 1:6?) — the family will board her up in a wooden compartment.

10 From the vantage point of history, the girl answers her brothers. She was in fact a wall, and her breasts were its towers. These images are synonymously parallel; she was impregnable. No man had entry to her. Because of her chastity, she has found שָׁלוֹם (GK 8934), “peace, contentment” in the eyes of her lover. The way to peace is through being a wall.

It is noteworthy that the reward for her battlemented conduct is “peace.” Peace from what? In the commentary on 5:1b, it was noted that the Song compares love to alcohol rather than to a satisfying meal. Here the best that love offers the girl is peace. Peace implies the absence of strife and has in its meaning an awareness of war. Perhaps the peace that she has found in her lover’s eyes is peace from the effects of love — peace rather than midnight searches, terrifying dreams, lovesickness, syncopes.

NOTES

9 צָוַר (*ṣāṣar*, “enclose”) from rWx (*s.ûr*) is a military term usually glossed “besiege.”

10 The verse reads literally, “I a-wall my-breasts as-towers then I-was/became in-his-eyes one-finding שָׁלוֹם [*šālôm*, GK 8934].” The past tense, “I *was* a wall” seems preferable to the present, “I *am* a wall.” If the girl is still a wall, then she could hardly have a lover. שָׁלוֹם can denote “wholeness” (Ge 37:14), “safety” (2Sa 17:3), and “prosperity” (Lev 26:6). It is an easily lost favorable circumstance not to be taken for granted.The girl’s שָׁלוֹם found in his eyes, is causally connected with her description as a fortification that fended off love until it was pleased — on the day she was spoken for.

2. Parable of Solomon's Vineyard (8:11 – 12)

11 Solomon had a vineyard in Baal Hamon;
he let out his vineyard to tenants.
Each was to bring for its fruit
a thousand shekels of silver.
12 But my own vineyard is mine to give;
the thousand shekels are for you, O Solomon,
and two hundred are for those who tend its fruit.

COMMENTARY

11 – 12 Baal Hamon is an unknown locale. *baʿal* (GK 1251) means "lord," and *ham*m *ôn* means "multitude," as in Genesis 17:4, "father of a multitude." *baʿal* can also signify "husband" (Est 1:17; Pr 31:11). Thus the place name may signify "husband of a multitude," a caustic remark at the expense of the libidinous king. Its collective organization is its only stated feature. To administrate his vineyard, Solomon must let it out to tenants, who keep twenty percent for themselves. The institution of the harem had converted love into a commercial enterprise and, in the process, sacrificed the essence of love.

In contrast to this perversion, the girl possesses her own vineyard, her own relationship, and lacks nothing. She keeps it all, in contrast to Solomon, who pays a price. Thus the anthology ends in a parable contrasting its own vision of love with Solomon's harem, highlighting the girl's advantage over the king.

NOTES

12 A literal reading renders, "My-vineyard which-is-to-me before-me." If the vineyard is her relationship or her lover, this can be translated, "My own vineyard stands before me." If the vineyard is an image for the girl, it is translated (NIV), "My own vineyard is mine to give."

III. Final Thought (8:13 – 14)

13 You who dwell in the gardens
with friends in attendance,
let me hear your voice!
14 Come away, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the spice-laden mountains.

13 – 14 The anthology of songs is complete, but the Song of Songs ends with motifs from 2:8 – 17 and perhaps 4:12.The boy cries out to the girl among her companions in the gardens to let him hear her voice, thus recalling 2:14:

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
Show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
For your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.

The boy is distanced from the girl and desires to be near her. She responds with an echo of 2:9, 17 by inviting the boy to frolic as a rutting gazelle on her fragrant hills.

The perspective of 2:8 – 17 is the note that ends the Song of Songs. This perspective is one of anticipation and waiting, the seasonal aspect of love.The lovers are truly in love, yet are apart; love is not yet pleased to arise. This abrupt anticlimax leaves the reader on a note of yearning. In this respect, it mirrors the adjurations that interrupt the erotic flow of events elsewhere in the Song (2:7; 3:5; 8:4). The longing of unfulfilled desire highlights the lack of satisfaction that characterizes the Song. Whether one is a lover or not, an aching for true Love is always present.The Song of Songs concludes in this mood of the boy and girl, apart in time yet with the expectation of consummation.

NOTES

14 Lit., “Flee, my lover.” Falk, 93 argues that the girl sends him away in the morning light lest their clandestine romance be discovered. However, the girl can hardly dismiss him to the aromatic hills, since they signify the girl! See note

on 2:17a.

ISAIAH

GEOFFREY W. GROGAN

Introduction

1. Background
2. Authorship, Unity, and Date
3. Theology
4. Eschatology
5. Messianism and the Servant Songs
6. Structure
7. Canonicity
8. Text
9. Bibliography
10. Outline

1. BACKGROUND

The prophecy of Isaiah is the third longest complete literary entity in the Bible and is exceeded in length only by Jeremiah and Psalms. Psalms is in a special category as a collection of separate literary units.

Isaiah is at once familiar and neglected. Chapters such as 6; 35; 40; and 53 are among the best-known parts of the OT; and there are briefer, well-known sections in chapters such as 7; 9; and 61. There are, however, vast stretches of the book (esp. in chs. 13 – 34) that are virtually unknown to most Chris tians. Ignorance of any part of Scripture is to be deplored, but this is particularly so with a book that gives such a manifold presentation of Christ. Moreover, a study of the book in its entirety presents a most majestic and moving view of him, a view in which the virtually unknown contexts of the well-known passages shed a flood of light on them. The NT writers recognized Isaiah's special importance; they frequently quoted from and alluded to the book. Many of its verses and phrases have passed into common use in literature. For example, there are seventy quotations from Isaiah in the *Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*,[1] and Handel used much of Isaiah's language in the *Messiah*.

Currently, Isaiah studies are a growing point in OT scholarship, and new

studies of the book are constantly being published. It is not surprising to find Blenkinsopp declaring, “Writing a commentary on Isaiah 1 – 39 in the middle of a paradigm shift has not been easy.”[2]This is true for the whole book, but anything that makes us look at the book in a fresh way is stimulating, although of course we must subject such new approaches to rigorous testing.

Sources of Information

The book itself is the major source of information. Additional and supporting material is contained in 2 Kings 15 – 21 and 2 Chronicles 26 – 33. Other contemporary or near-contemporary prophets were Amos and Hosea, who both prophesied to the northern kingdom, and Micah, who like Isaiah was a vehicle of God’s word to Judah. Assyrian clay tablets are a leading source of material outside the OT. Some Jewish traditions will be mentioned later.

The Life of Isaiah

The opening heading (1:1) places Isaiah’s ministry in the reigns of Uzziah (or Azariah, as he is called in 2 Kings), Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. We suggest that in fact his ministry continued into the reign of Manasseh. Nothing is known about Isaiah’s father, Amoz. Jewish tradition declared him to be of royal stock.This cannot be substantiated, but Isaiah may have been an aristocrat, for he seemed to have easy access to kings (7:3; 37:21 – 22; et al.). His wife is called “the prophetess” (8:3), which may simply mean she was a prophet’s wife, as there is no record of a personal prophetic ministry by her. She was, however, the mother of his two known children, both of whom had names with symbolic meanings (7:3; 8:3, 18), thus perhaps accounting for this description of her.

Isaiah was probably young at the time of his vision and call (ch. 6), as his ministry cannot have been shorter than thirty-four years. Some commentators, believing that before his vision he had a close association with the temple and thus absorbed the “holiness” terminology from a knowledge of the priestly rites, think Isaiah may have been a “cult prophet” before he received the personal commission of ch. 6; but this is speculative. He seems to have prophesied largely

— if not exclusively — in Jerusalem and its environs.

It is often assumed from 8:16 – 17 that when Ahaz rejected Isaiah's warning, the prophet temporarily withdrew from public ministry and concentrated on his disciples. His last datable oracles were in 701 BC, the year of the events recorded in chs. 36 and 37, though the noncanonical *Ascension of Isaiah* states he was martyred by being sawn in two (cf. Heb 11:37) during the reign of Manasseh, who came to the throne in 687 BC.

The International Scene

During Isaiah's childhood, Israel and Judah — under Jeroboam II and Uzziah respectively — enjoyed a period of prosperity with little interference from foreign powers. Egypt was weak, while Assyria was occupied with problems elsewhere. The aggressive empire-builder Tiglath-Pileser III (known in Babylon as "Pul") came to the Assyrian throne in 745 BC, and the situation quickly changed. Egypt reckoned the small kingdoms in Palestine and Syria to be within her sphere of influence, but Assyria began to carve out a western extension to its empire in that region.

Damascus (732 BC) and much of Galilee fell to Tiglath-Pileser. Then Shalmaneser V (727 – 722 BC) and Sargon II (722 – 705 BC) attacked Samaria, the latter taking it in 722 or 721 BC. In the last decade or so of the eighth century Egypt revived somewhat, and Assyria encountered trouble from Babylon. Because of this Judah and other neighboring states rebelled against Assyria. Sennacherib (705 – 681 BC) invaded Judah in 701 and subdued it; but God saved Jerusalem, which was to fall over a century later to a resurgent Babylon.

The Reigns of Uzziah and Jotham

There are some problems in dating of the reigns of Judah's kings from Uzziah to Hezekiah.[3] Uzziah's death has been variously placed between 747 and 735 BC, the most likely date being around 740. Jotham seems to have been regent for

some years before this; and apparently, several years before his own death in 731 BC he handed over the reins of effective government to his son, Ahaz. Apart from the inaugural vision recorded in ch. 6, no material in the book can be dated with certainty from the reigns of either Uzziah or Jotham. Uzziah had been a godly man until the pride of his latter days (2Ch 26:16 – 21), but neither he nor Jotham removed the idolatrous high places.

The Syro-Ephraimite War

The threat from Tiglath-Pileser brought Syria and Israel into coalition around 734 BC, and they tried to force Judah to join them. Ahaz occupied Judah's throne. Isaiah challenged him to trust in the Lord (Isa 7); instead, Ahaz called on Assyria for aid. Damascus, the capital of Syria, was taken by the Assyrians in 732 and much of Galilee was subjugated (2Ki 15:25 – 29). Pekah, king of Israel, was murdered by Hoshea, who replaced him and reigned as a virtual Assyrian puppet. Pekah and Rezin, king of Syria, had inflicted some harm on Judah before the Assyrians brought relief to Ahaz (16:5 – 9), but more serious still were the religious consequences of the latter's appeal to Assyria (16:10 – 20).

The Fall of Samaria

The death of Tiglath-Pileser in 727 BC raised false hopes of freedom for the little kingdoms on the Mediterranean seaboard. When Ahaz died about a year later, Isaiah uttered a prophecy warning Philistia of the consequences of revolt and, by implication, counseled Judah against joining her (14:28 – 32). It was some time later that King Hoshea withheld tribute from Shalmaneser V, who for three years besieged Samaria, which was later taken by his successor, Sargon II. According to the Assyrians, over twenty-seven thousand Israelites were deported and settled in the northern parts of the Assyrian empire at this time.[4]For about a decade the area was fairly quiet as Sargon was occupied with wars elsewhere; but then Egypt began to encourage the Philistines and others to form a new coalition against Assyria. This coalition was crushed by Sargon in 711 BC in a battle on the Egyptian border. Judah under Hezekiah heeded Isaiah's warning and refused to participate (20:16).

Hezekiah and Sennacherib

Sargon died around 705 BC and was replaced by Sennacherib. Immediately in various parts of the Assyrian Empire there was trouble, encouraged by the Ethiopian monarchs, who were imparting new vigor to Egypt, and also by Merodach-Baladan (Marduk-apal-iddina) of Babylon. This time, despite Isaiah's warnings (chs. 30 – 31), Hezekiah became involved and prepared Jerusalem for a siege (22:8 – 11). The Assyrian army invaded Judah, took forty-six walled cities, and devastated much of the countryside. It besieged Jerusalem, but Isaiah encouraged Hezekiah to trust in the Lord; and the city was delivered (37:36).It is unlikely that, as some scholars believe, Sennacherib invaded Judah again in 688, for this idea has no support in either the Assyrian or the Babylonian records.

Babylon

Merodach-Baladan, a Chaldean prince, took power in Babylon in 721 BC and declared it independent of Assyria. Its status under him for the next decade or so is somewhat uncertain, but it is known that Sargon entered Babylon in 711 or 710 without a fight. After Sargon's death, however, Merodach-Baladan became a leader of movements of rebellion against Sennacherib and sought to involve Hezekiah (39:12). Sennacherib defeated and deposed Merodach-Baladan; but Babylon revived again during the seventh century and became the dominant Mesopotamian power toward the end of that century. This led ultimately to the subjection of Judah to Babylon and to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The ensuing exile fulfilled God's warning to Hezekiah delivered through Isaiah (ch. 39) and forms the background to the prophecies that follow this chapter. Cyrus the Persian, the human facilitator of the return, is referred to in chs. 44 – 45. Chapters 56 – 66, however, assume not a Babylonian background but one in the Holy Land either before or after the exile.

2. AUTHORSHIP, UNITY, AND DATE

Over the past couple of centuries, scholarly study of Isaiah, as of the remainder of the OT, has passed through a number of stages refl ecting changes in the

dominant type of criticism. These stages have been overlapping, and, in fact, the earlier stages are still practiced today, as Blenkinsopp's recent commentary clearly reveals.

History of Criticism

Source criticism. The book of Isaiah has come down to us as a unity, and the name "Isaiah son of Amoz" is the only one linked with it in any Hebrew manuscript or ancient version. Until the late eighteenth century, only one writer — the twelfth-century Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra — had questioned the universal assumption that Isaiah wrote the entire book. He maintained that chs. 40 – 66 were from a prophet who lived late in the Babylonian captivity, and Ibn Ezra quoted an older contemporary, Moses ben Samuel Ibn Gekatilla, as holding a somewhat similar opinion, although this statement cannot be checked.

In the late eighteenth century, soon after Pentateuchal criticism began to get into its stride, the new critical school took an interest in Isaiah. Döderlein and Eichhorn both attributed chs. 40 – 66 to an exilic prophet who soon was known as "Deutero-Isaiah." This view came to be widely held in scholarly circles, though its dissemination was due largely to George Adam Smith's commentary published in 1890.

Several leading conservative scholars addressed the question of authorship, and the works of Alexander, Hengstenberg, and Delitzsch are of special importance. They were Hebraists and exegetes of the highest caliber; and each maintained the Isaianic authorship of the whole book, though Delitzsch later became more open to the Deutero-Isaiah hypothesis. J. A. Alexander's work stimulated an interest in the issue at Princeton Seminary and, later, at Westminster Seminary, which bore fruit in the twentieth century in the works of O. T. Allis and E. J. Young.

The work of Bernhard Duhm has influenced all subsequent discussion.[5] His commentary put forward the theory, already being canvassed by some critics, that chs. 56 – 66 were the work of a postexilic writer, whom he named "Trito-Isaiah." Duhm believed, over against many later critics, that Deutero-Isaiah lived not in Babylon but in the Holy Land or Egypt. Important, too, was his

identification of the Servant Songs, which for him were Isaiah 42:1 – 4; 49:1 – 6; 50:4 – 9; 52:13 – 53:12; and he assigned them to another author.

Duhm's Trito-Isaiah theory was widely, though not quite universally, accepted by critical scholars. Writing in 1999, C. Franke said that theories proposing a Jerusalem postexilic provenance for chs. 56 – 66 are still only possibilities remaining to be proved.[6]Less popular was Duhm's idea of a separate author for the songs. He held, too, that there was much non-Isaianic material in chs. 1 – 39; many scholars from his time onward have denied at least chs. 13 – 14; 24 – 27; and 35 – 39 to the eighth-century prophet.

How, then, did the book of Isaiah come into its present form? Duhm believed a number of oracle collections circulated independently before being gathered into one volume, which was later augmented by chs. 40 – 55 and later still by chs. 56 – 66. Early in the twentieth century, Karl Budde put forward an alternative view. He thought a small collection of Isaiah's prophecies formed a nucleus that received successive expansions over the centuries. Emphasis was placed increasingly on the part played by a continuing school of Isaiah's disciples (an idea based largely on 8:16) and also by a school associated with Deutero-Isaiah, a school perhaps responsible for later collecting together the oracles in chapters 56 – 66, which were increasingly denied a common author.[7]S. Mowinckel held that a school of Isaiah existed for at least two centuries.[8]But where is there clear evidence for this? It does not exist.

In 1928 C. C. Torrey, for long the *enfant terrible* of biblical criticism, attacked the normal critical views of chs. 40 – 66.[9] He held the references to Babylon and Cyrus to be interpolations that, once removed, enable us to interpret these chapters as the work of a Palestinian writer living toward the close of the fifth century BC. Torrey's views did not find wide acceptance, though most recent scholars still feel it necessary to deal with his points.

Form criticism. A new factor in critical studies was the rise of form criticism — chiefly the work of Hermann Gunkel. Allis has well defined this method as "the attempt to determine, to classify, and to trace the history of the various literary types or patterns which are to be found in the Bible and to relate them to similar 'forms' to be found in other literatures."[10] Form criticism identifies such forms as hymns, love songs, proverbs, oracles, and disputations in the OT, many

used by the prophets.

The effect of form criticism on Isaianic studies has been to accelerate fragmentation, especially in chs.40 – 55 — the one part of the book widely regarded as an original literary unit — even though in this criticism the various small sections are often attributed primarily to one person. J. Begrich did much form-critical work on Deutero-Isaiah;[11]and S. Mowinckel argued that the oracles it contains, at first delivered orally, were brought together and linked by catchwords, so that the literary unit produced was artificial.[12]Westermann's commentary represents a more moderate form-critical approach. He holds, for example, that by far the greater part of Deutero-Isaiah derives from the prophet himself.[13]The interest in form criticism is still very much alive despite the advent of other types of criticism.

Redaction criticism. The advent of redaction criticism brought a new appraisal of the role of redactors, who were no longer viewed as little more than mere compilers of the work of others but were often now seen as gifted theologians, each with a definite message to convey. J. Barton notes that the book of Isaiah, although complex, is also distinctive: "There are very few passages which might just as well have come from any other prophet. It was put together by many hands, yet it is far from being a rubbish-tip, the insides of many unconnected filing-cabinets."[14]As R. E. Clements says, "The book of Isaiah comes to us as a single literary whole, comprising sixty-six chapters, and this given datum of the form of the book must be regarded as a feature requiring explanation."[15]In various articles, Clements suggests that the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah were added to the book to complement those in Isaiah 1 – 39, which had given insight into the reasons for the judgments on Judah and Jerusalem.

It is often held that the book was subject to more than one redaction. Hermann Barth argued that there was a redaction of chs. 2 – 32 in the time of Josiah and that its purpose was to show the relevance of these prophecies to the rise and fall of Assyria.[16]His thesis has been widely accepted. H. G. M. Williamson holds that Isaiah 40 – 55 never existed as a distinct literary work but that the figure known as Deutero-Isaiah edited the existing book of Isaiah and added these chapters, written by himself, so that the book presents a balanced message with both threats of judgment and promises of salvation.[17] A somewhat negative

development is the line of thought expressed by R. P. Carroll, who applied the psychological theory of "cognitive dissonance" to the prophecies of the OT,[18]including those of the book of Isaiah. According to this view, prophecies were constantly proved to be in error and so were adapted by later generations in order to fit the actual facts.

Redaction criticism can, of course, be allied to considerable skepticism about authorship. O. Kaiser, holding that the final redaction of the book dates from the Maccabean period, came to the conclusion that, because of the work of redactors, it was now impossible to identify anything in the book as indubitably by Isaiah himself.[19]J. Vermeylen holds that the book went through no fewer than seven different editions.[20]J. Barton makes a most significant admission when he says, "If redaction criticism plays its hand too confidently, we end up with a piece of writing so coherent that no division into sources is warranted any longer."[21]But is that necessarily to be lamented?

The work of B. S. Childs, with his strong emphasis on the final and canonical form of biblical books and the importance of devoting study to this, is like a kind of bridge between redaction and rhetorical criticism. He argues that the phrase "the former things" in 42:9; 43:9, 16 – 19; et al., refers to the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem.[22]He writes:

> The nature of the biblical understanding of prophecy and fulfillment is made clear by the canonical form of the book of Isaiah. The Old Testament is not a message about divine acts in history as such but about the power of the word of God. The divine word which proclaims the will of God confirms itself in bringing to completion its promise.[23]

Rhetorical criticism. Rhetorical criticism, which is concerned with biblical books as works of literature, began with the work of Muilenberg as far as Isaiah is concerned. In fact, he appears to have coined the phrase. He pursued this new approach in his commentary on Isaiah 40 – 66.[24] He emphasizes the literary features of the great poems in this part of the book and in so doing has been followed by a number of other writers. W. M. Brownlee pointed out that evidence from lQIsa (a three-line space before ch. 34) showed that Isaiah was really a two-volume work with a division at this point; and he demonstrated that there is a great deal of thematic correspondence between the two parts.[25]C. A. Evans, following Brownlee, divides each half of the book into seven sections,

each of which is related to its fellow in the other half. [26]

Several scholars view the book or a large part of it as a kind of religious drama. J. H. Eaton views chs. 40 – 66 this way.[27] Watts holds that the final product of the Isaiah school was a "Vision" presented as a twelve-act drama, which is how he sees the book in its final form. He adopts a "reader-response" approach, but not so much from the standpoint of a modern reader as of one living at about 435 BC, when, he holds, the book was redacted to this final form. He says that "it develops and presents fifth-century issues by presenting materials from eighth, seventh, sixth and fifth century settings."[28] Baltzer maintains that chs.40 – 55 are a liturgical drama, somewhat after an Attic Greek model, and that this was performed at one of the great feasts.[29]

We ought to take note of both the gains and the dangers of the application of contemporary literary theories to the text of Isaiah, as also their application to Scripture as a whole. E. Conrad, for instance, says "the text is an object to be studied in its own right without reference to external factors such as author intention and historical background."[30] Some writers practically ignore historical-critical issues altogether.[31] Conrad's treatment is not an extreme example of reader-response criticism, for he does try to read the book as a product of pre-Christian Judaism. He thinks in terms of an "implied audience" of Jews who inherited the book in its final form and would be encouraged by it to look to Yahweh for the establishing of a world order of peace.

This kind of approach means that some of the problems that have been explained in terms of different sources and redactors in the past are now often approached differently. So, for example, C. Franke, in her study of Isaiah 46 – 48, begins with the text in its present form and emphasizes that "it is important to examine these so-called difficult passages to see how they function in their present literary context."[32]

Without doubt this new approach has been productive of new insights. We need to realize, however, that freeing a book completely from its historical setting can lead to a highly undisciplined subjectivism. If this is the Word of God and we are accountable to him for how we treat it, then it surely must possess objective meaning, although it is important for us always to bear in mind that

none of us is free from presuppositions that we bring to the text. It is salutary, therefore, to heed Conrad's warning that "the worst kind of eisegesis may be readings in which interpreters remain unaware of their involvement because they think they are reading meaning *out of* the text, or doing exegesis."[33]

The present situation and the way forward. Useful surveys of the state of Isaianic studies in the early 1990s may be found in Wegner[34] and, more briefly, in Williamson.[35]The surveys of these two scholars are not identical but they overlap considerably. Further indications of scholarship trends may be seen in Melugin and Sweeney's symposium, whose contributors tend to approach the book holistically.[36]

Although they have not completely cleared the board of source and form criticism, redaction and rhetorical criticism are the two most influential types of scholarly Isaianic study at the present time. The way they have influenced Isaianic studies may encourage the hope that the criticism of this great OT book of Isaiah will eventually come full circle. Certainly this kind of holistic treatment of the book is a welcome change (even though it has produced some rather eccentric theories, such as that of Baltzer), and it has been pursued by major OT scholars such as R. E. Clements, P. Ackroyd, and R. Rendtorff.

It is, however, one thing to place emphasis on the theology of the ultimate redactor and quite another to accept the work as a whole as the literary expression of the prophecies of Isaiah. A glance at Clements' commentary on Isaiah 1 – 39 will reveal that alongside his acceptance of Hermann Barth's theory of a major redaction in the time of Josiah stands a belief in the extreme fragmentariness of the material used by the redactor, with the integrity of passage after passage questioned. But, as Motyer argues, it is not easy to believe that a prophet with a high view of his own inspiration would leave later generations to handle his prophecies however they would, rather than himself putting them together in a volume that would then teach the great lessons he was raised up as a prophet to communicate.[37]

Motyer's two commentaries represent an approach from the standpoint of redaction and rhetorical criticism, but in his case the redactor is Isaiah himself. He points out that what we have in the prophetic books is not their preached

messages but “a written distillation of their ministry.”[38]So in this way prophecies that were historically related have been brought together into a united whole, which then, as a book of Scripture, has become available to a later Jewish and eventually a Christian readership. This approach is not unlike the view of many recent Psalm scholars that the individual psalms have been brought together in the Psalter in such a way as to convey an overall message.

The principle known as “Occam’s Razor” is the idea that, all other things being equal, a simple explanation of phenomena is more likely to be true than a complicated one. Is the time ripe now for the application of that principle and for another “paradigm shift,” to use Thomas Kuhn’s pregnant phrase?[39]Has the Copernican revolution in Isaiah studies promoted by scholars such as Eichhorn and Duhm run its course, and is it time to move to a new appreciation of the book’s unity, not simply in terms of redaction but of authorship? How profitable and how productive such a return could be, and what a stimulus to faith in Isaiah’s God!

The Case against Its Unity

The nature of biblical prophecy. The case against the unity of the book usually begins with statements about the nature of biblical prophecy. It is said that prophecy is essentially an activity claiming divine inspiration in which the prophet addresses his contemporaries with a message from God related to their own situation.The claim is made that in Isaiah 40 – 66 we meet a situation and an audience quite remote from the eighth century. If these chapters had not come down to us as part of the book of Isaiah, nobody would ever have thought them his. The only personal name mentioned in these chapters — apart from characters from past history such as Abraham — is Cyrus, the Persian monarch whose activities made it possible for the people to return from Babylonian exile in the sixth century; therefore, it is said, we need to date at least this part of the book during the Babylonian exile, which obviously means that it could not possibly have been written by Isaiah.

From a different perspective, H. G. M.Williamson, who does not deny the possibility of predictive prophecy, maintains that the emphasis on fulfilled prophecy in Deutero-Isaiah, which, Williamson assumes, refers to the prophecies

of Isaiah of Jerusalem, clearly implies that the speaker is located after the fulfillment of the prophecies.[40]

The difference in theology between the two main parts. It is also said that there is an important difference in the theology of the two main parts. Isaiah was a preacher of judgment. If he had a hope for the future — and some critics dispute this altogether — it centered in the monarchy and in a remnant that would escape the judgment on the nation as a whole. The message of the section of the book that begins at ch. 40, however, is one of comfort and salvation. There is little interest in the royal house; instead, the mysterious figure of the Servant of the Lord appears. There is a strong emphasis on the sole deity of Yahweh in this part of the book. Then, from ch. 56 onward, the book shows the typical postexilic Jewish preoccupation with matters such as the Sabbath and fasting.

The difference of style and vocabulary. The style and vocabulary also seem to change as we move from ch. 39 to ch. 40. Isaiah's style was strongly illustrative. There is less material of this kind after ch. 39.The style becomes lofty, with a multitude of rhetorical questions and many passages where God is in dispute with the people and argues his case with them. Blenkinsopp notes that the phrase "all flesh" occurs only in the second half of the book (40:5 – 6; 49:25 – 26; 66:16, 23 – 24).[41]

The Case for Its Unity

The testimony of early Judaism. It is clear that the Jews accepted Isaiah's authorship of the later chapters of the book well before the coming of Christ. The book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), written early in the second century BC, says, "By the spirit of might he [Isaiah] saw the last things, and comforted those who mourned in Zion" (Sir 48:24). The last clause clearly refers to Isaiah 61:3. The pre-Chris tian Isaiah scroll from Qumran known as 1QIsaa has the complete text of the book. The only significant gap in the text is that between chs. 33 and 34 (noted above). Moreover, a few lines of ch. 40 actually commence at the foot of a column. Josephus, writing late in the first century AD, says that Cyrus read the prophecies about himself in Isaiah and wished to fulfill them.[42]Whether or not this story is true, it shows that Josephus regarded this material as predictive in nature.

The testimony of the NT. More important, however, is the testimony of the NT, which quotes Isaiah — and from different parts (e.g., Jn 12:37 – 41) — by name more often than all the other writing prophets combined. It is said that this testimony has little significance because all the NT writers were really doing was identifying the source of their quotations in particular OT books. Although this explanation would fit some of the quotations, there are others that cannot be explained in this way. Each of the named quotations from Isaiah in Paul's letter to the Romans is introduced by phraseology using verbs of speech (Ro 9:27, 29; 10:16, 20 – 21), and those in Romans 10 are from Isaiah 53 and 65. Clearly, Paul believed these chapters to be the work of Isaiah himself.

The general heading to the book (1:1). None of the OT prophetic books is without an opening title in which the prophet's name is given (e.g., Isa 1:1). Isaiah's name is sometimes also mentioned in headings (chs. 2; 7; 13; 20; 37 – 39). It is true that there is no reference to him by name in chs. 40 – 66, but then there is none either between chs. 20 and 37. The opening heading appears to be intended to cover much material because of the reference in it to no fewer than four kingly reigns; and it would be natural to assume that, like the headings that commence other prophetic books, this was intended to cover the work as a whole. The absence of a heading at the beginning of chs. 40 and 56 is particularly significant. If these circulated initially without headings, they would stand alone among the OT prophets; and if the headings were lost at some time, it seems inconceivable that oral tradition did not preserve the names. The heading to ch. 13 is especially significant, for it links Isaiah with an oracle about Babylon.

Unifying theological themes. The argument from theological differences in various parts of Isaiah — never very persuasive — appears still weaker now than it once did; even staunch advocates of the view that the book comes from more than one author are laying stress on its unifying theological motifs because of the new interest in the book's redactional unity. H. G. M. Williamson says of the new interest in significant connections between the two main parts of the book, "The flood of publications on this has now reached far beyond the point where it can be sensibly documented."[43]C. Seitz addresses the issue as to whether Isaiah was a prophet of salvation and argues that 11:1 – 9 and the material following it is salvation preaching awaiting a fulfillment beyond the days of the prophet

himself.[44]Motyer refers to the book as “a literature bursting with internal evidence of its unity.”[45]

Without doubt the whole book has a most exalted doctrine of God. Emphasis on his sovereignty (6:1 – 13; 24:13, 23; 37:15 – 20; 43:8 – 11), his holiness (1:4; 5:16; 30:9 – 16; 37:23; 48:17 – 19; 57:15 – 21), and his hatred of pride (2:11 – 18; 14:12 – 15; 37:23 – 25; 47:8 – 11; 66:1 – 3) are not confined to any one section. For these and other theological links, see Eschatology.

The elevated style of the book. A survey of the book reveals the high literary quality of so much of its material — in its poetic style, in the wonderful way thought and language are matched to each other, in the plentiful and yet not forced use of devices such as assonance and chiasm, and in the use of analogy and anthropomorphism. Special studies such as that of Franke’s *Isaiah 46, 47 and 48: A New Literary-Critical Reading* have provided detailed evidence of this for the passages in view. She argues that form criticism is inadequate in its tools and methodology for studying such passages, for “when form critics look only for genres as markers of division, they fail to see other elements that serve to unite a variety of genres, or traces of genres, into a larger whole.”[46]It is true that there are also passages where the style is somewhat more pedestrian; but there are few of these, and they are not confined to any one part of the book.Variety of style is a characteristic of all great authors who write on diverse themes and over a considerable period of time.

The prophet has favorite analogies, such as that of the burden-bearer (1:4, 14, 24; 46:1 – 4; 53:4, 11 – 12) and the branch or the shoot (4:2; 6:13; 11:1; 53:2). The title “Holy One of Israel” is found twelve times in Isaiah 1 – 39 and thirteen times in the remainder of the book. Its use elsewhere in the OT is infrequent, and its use by Isaiah probably reflects the deep impression made on him by the awesome vision related in ch. 6.

Chapters 40 – 55, written rather than preached. If Isaiah lived into the reign of Manasseh, it is unlikely that he could often prophesy publicly at that time. Is it possible, then, that he turned to the writing of prophecies given to him for a later age? It is perhaps significant that there are several references in chs.1 – 39 to the writing down of prophecies (8:1 – 2, 16 – 18; 30:8 – 9). If then much of chs. 40 – 55 never had a prewritten form, this in itself may well account for

the elevated, flowing style of this part of the book.[47]

If it be objected that in this case Isaiah was comforting his people in view of a disaster that was still a century and a half in the future, a clear answer can be given to this.The promises of God about Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty meant that the people needed to be assured of the veracity of God, which was, of course, vindicated in the return from exile. Moreover, if chs. 40 – 55 were written during the reign of Manasseh, this shortens the time scale somewhat, and, of course, neither Isaiah nor his readers knew the time scale — and they did not need to know it. All they needed was the assurance that God would be true to his Word.

The supposed Babylonian background. Although we do not approve of Torrey's suggestion that the references to Babylon may be removed from the book quite easily and without detriment to the remaining material, this does underline the point that there is little in the way of Babylonian background.We might expect more if the author of chs. 40 – 55 lived there. Of course, it must be said that some writers who accept Deutero-Isaiah doubt whether he was resident in Babylon, though their grounds for this doubt can really form part of the argument in favor of the book's unity as the work of the Palestinian resident — Isaiah, son of Amoz.

E. J. Young, having pointed out that the references to trees (41:19; 44:14) are significant because they are native to the Holy Land, goes on to say, "In 43:14 the Lord speaks of sending to Babylon, a passage which is clearly addressed to those who are not in Babylon. In 41:9 the prophet addresses Israel as the seed of Abraham which the Lord has taken from the ends of the earth."[48]He also compares the use of such language made by the prophet in 45:22 and 46:11 and then says, "But 52:11 is conclusive. The phrase 'from thence' clearly shows that this passage was not uttered in Babylon."[49]

It is worth noting that writers as diverse as Torrey, Mowinckel, and Seitz, none of whom can be accused of obscurantism, find arguments for a Babylonian provenance for chs. 40 – 55 less than convincing. Seitz, for example, says, "The reasons for Duhm's decision to reject a Babylonian provenance for chs. 40 – 55 are quite persuasive, even though they are virtually ignored in the present climate of Second Isaiah research."[50]

Supernatural prediction in chs. 40 – 48. It should be particularly noticed that some passages have an exceptional emphasis on supernatural prediction (e.g., 25:1 – 28; 41:21 – 29; 44:7 – 8; 46:10 – 11; 48:3 – 7). Also, one of the functions of ch. 39 seems to be to show the relevance of chs. 40 – 66 to the people of Isaiah's day. There were events going on that would ultimately lead to exile in Babylon. The prophecies in these chapters were not addressed to the king, whose sinful pride is here treated as a major moral cause of the exile, but to the people as a whole, whose descendants would suffer through it; and it assures them that the long-term purposes of God for them would not be thwarted by it. Only the God of Israel, the people are assured, could make such predictions.

It is in this context that the revelation of the name of Cyrus is given. There is one other instance of the disclosure of a name many generations before a person's arrival on the stage of history (1Ki 13:2). As Allis has shown, the name of Cyrus is revealed in a most impressive way, at the poetic climax of "the poem of the transcendence of the Lord God of Israel" that has a special numerico-climactic structure.[51]It is only the exceptional character of this revelation that can adequately account for the literary phenomenon here.The reader is advised to consult this whole section in Allis.

Williamson writes:

> In Chapter 41, in particular, Deutero-Isaiah uses the argument from prophecy in order to encourage faith in the new message which is now being proclaimed. If a prophet maintained that certain things which have been prophesied in the past have been accurately fulfilled, so that one may have confidence in the reliability of the new predictions being made, the argument both presupposes an acceptance of the validity of predictive prophecy and demands that the speaker should himself be located after the fulfillment of these prophecies.[52]

Agreed, but much prophesied in the past was fulfilled in Isaiah's own day, and he could well have written chs. 40 – 55 after these fulfillments had already taken place.

We conclude that the case for the unity of the book is strong. While it would be too much to say that its rejection is invariably due to a rejection of supernatural prophetic prediction (for there are some supernaturalists who hold

to multiple authorship), there is no doubt that this lies behind a great deal of opposition to it. It seems likely that Isaiah lived on into the reign of Manasseh, that during this reign he was unable to function openly as a prophet, but that he committed to writing the revelations he received about the future of his people. No doubt the people in Babylon, chastened by the hand of their God — and with a new awareness of his sovereignty — would watch events with a deep sense of anticipation; and these prophecies would themselves be instrumental in the hands of God in helping to create that atmosphere of faith and obedience that led to the return. When at last the decree of Cyrus for their return was given, and not earlier — for Isaiah had declared that Cyrus was to be the divine agent of this great purpose — they would respond to the divine call, “Depart, depart” (52:11).

3. THEOLOGY

Just as Paul’s theology was profoundly molded by Christ’s encounter with him on the Damascus road, so Isaiah’s temple vision of the thrice-holy God, recorded in chapter 6, deeply infl uenced his whole prophetic career and his theology. No doubt much he learned there simply reinforced the instruction he had already received through the regular teaching agencies of the family and the godly community in Israel, but this was all brought vividly to life in a personal encounter in which he was commissioned for divine service.[53]

Doctrine of God

Isaiah learned some things about God — his holiness, his transcendent separateness, and his incomparable majesty and character. Isaiah’s distinctive title for God is “the Holy One of Israel,” used twenty-five times in all and felt to be characteristic of his message, even by those who rejected it (30:11). If we distinguish the majestic holiness and the moral holiness of God, in which he is exalted both as Creator and as the all-righteous One, we can see that, though theoretically distinguishable, they find their true union in his being as revealed here.

Isaiah learns that this God is King, enthroned above all, eternal and deathless,

unlike Uzziah and other earthly monarchs. He is the only God there is, the living God, and the prophet pours scorn on those who worship idols. He is the Lord Almighty, so that the authority of the supreme King is wedded to an omnipotence that enables him to carry out his every purpose. As the almighty King he could use Assyria and Babylon as instruments of his punitive purpose and yet include them also in the great judgments on all the nations (chs. 13 – 23). In fact, the whole world, as ch. 24 shows, will come under his judgment. He is also able to bring to fruition his purposes for his people and encourages them with the vision of his sovereign power (chs. 40 – 66). Isaiah is given a wonderful disclosure of a great King for God's people, who himself bears the name "Mighty God" (9:6).

Isaiah sees that "the whole earth is full of his glory" (6:3), and thus it is not surprising that he speaks of God as Creator both of the universe (40:26; 42:5; 48:12 – 13) and of his people, Israel (43:1, 15). Consistent with this, his prophecies abound in references to the animal and plant creation. He has a vision of the whole earth full of the knowledge of the Lord (11:9) and even of new heavens and a new earth (65:17; 66:22).

Although the God of the whole earth, he has a special relationship to Israel, for he is Yahweh, "the LORD," the One who revealed himself in that name to Moses (Ex 3:13 – 15). Indeed, the phrase "Holy One of Israel" itself expresses the paradox of separateness and yet special relationship to one people. "This people" (6:9 – 10) and their land (6:12) are never far from Isaiah's thought. Despite their sin, their God has a continuing purpose for them, when they have been cleansed from that sin.

So much of this truth about God is summed up in the account of his call in chapter 6. There the prophet's lips are cleansed so that he may speak God's word to the people. He makes constant reference to God as speaking to him and in 55:9 – 11 gives a classic statement of the power of God's word. From the opening words of the prophecy to its final oracle it is clear that all he says comes from the Lord, who calls the whole universe to listen to his indictment of his people (1:2) and declares that ultimately he will create a new universe (66:22). So great is the scope of the message.

Old Testament scholars have discussed what is the overarching theme of OT

theology. Is it the covenant? Here in Isaiah, God's special covenantal relationship with Israel is presupposed throughout. Perhaps it is the kingdom of God. The whole structure of the book brings out the implications of God's sovereign control of things in the interests of his kingdom. Perhaps it is God's promise and fulfillment. Here we see time and again the word of divine authority being fulfilled and further fulfillment thereby pledged. Perhaps it is simply God himself, Israel's Holy One. This book is one long exposition of the implications, for Israel and the world, of who and what he is. So this great prophecy — its whole structure unified by its teaching about the Holy One of Israel, who is true to his word, is faithful to his covenant, and pursues the establishment of his kingdom — is a classic disclosure of the very heart of the OT faith.

Doctrine of Sin and Judgment

Because this great God is holy, Isaiah's encounter with him gives the prophet a smarting sense of sin. He is to be the mouthpiece of God, but Isaiah's lips are unclean. The people too have unclean lips; for, though worshiping their God with ritual (1:10 – 17), fasting (58:1 – 5), and words (29:13), they were in fact rebellious (1:2 – 6; 30:1 – 5; et al.). Many of them even expressed this fundamental rebelliousness in idolatry and syncretistic worship, thus showing their utter blindness (6:10; 29:9 – 10; 44:18; 45:20). The prophet's scathing denunciations of idolatry (chs. 40 – 48) reflect not only his own conviction that there is only one God but also his holy intolerance of the sin of idolatry.

Two sins that are singled out for special condemnation are pride and unbelief (e.g., 2:6 – 22; 7:1 – 9); for who in the presence of the holy God can lift their heads high or declare their self-sufficiency, whether "gods" or human beings? Ahaz and Hezekiah, the two kings most featured in the book, are both challenged to believe. Like all the eighth-century prophets, Isaiah also condemned injustice (1:16 – 17; 5:7 – 8; 26:56; 58:6 – 12), and it is for this reason largely that some scholars have suggested there may be special links between him and Amos.

The prophets have sometimes been accused of Pelagianism, viz., having a doctrine of sin that implies that human beings are perfectly capable, in themselves, of repentance and reformation. Indeed, the prophets did call their

hearers to repentance; but, like Jeremiah (e.g., Jer 13:23), Isaiah is made aware of the insensitivity that sin induces in the sinner (Isa 6:9 – 10). Sin is, of course, rebellion against the God who reveals himself; and the prophetic word itself is therefore, though a call to righteous ness, also the means through which this hardening process takes place. Sin has made the whole people unclean (64:5 – 7), and the prophet is warned that his own ministry will be rejected. There is a note of hope, however, in his own responsiveness to God's voice and his personal confession of sin.

Sin not only affects the sinner but also his environment. The land — God's own gift to his people, with its cities, houses, and fields — will be ravaged (6:11) by the Assyrians and Babylonians.This will be, as Isaiah is shown, "until the LORD has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken" (6:12) in the horrors of the exile, with Israel suffering under the Assyrians, and Judah and Jerusalem under the Babylonians. In this way Isaiah's message continues that of the book of Deuteronomy (cf. Dt 27 – 28). Isaiah 6:13 also refers to the repetitive nature of divine judgment, thus perhaps reflecting the message of the book of Judges that sin reasserts itself in every new generation and must be punished anew.

F. W. Davies has emphasized the importance of the ancient legal traditions of Israel for the prophets in general and for Isaiah in particular.[54]J. Barton, too, writes, "The prophets . . . were not presenting the people with previously unknown moral injunctions, but calling them back to the morality they should have known well enough already.The book of the covenant (Exod. 21 – 23) may lie behind many of Isaiah's references to ethics."[55]

Doctrine of Salvation

Yet the name of the prophet ("Yahweh is salvation") leads us to expect a positive note in the inaugural vision and in his message generally, and it is there, for example, in 6:7, in the prophet's personal experience of divine cleansing. The assurance of forgiveness for the penitent is constantly reiterated (1:18 – 19; 12:1;30:18 – 19; 33:24; 38:17; 40:12; 43:25; 44:22; 59:20); and, just as the ultimate sacrificial basis of it is suggested in 6:6 – 7, so it is shown to be grounded in the sacrificial sufferings of God's great Servant (52:13 – 53:12).

God’s purpose is concerned not only with the individual but also with the nation, and the remnant (6:13), a believing core of the people remaining after the nation’s judgment, is the guarantee of the divine veracity and so of the people’s future. In the prophet’s teaching about the remnant lies the seed of all that he declares about the future glory of Zion. It was in the temple and so, perhaps, in the context of worship that he saw this vision, and Zion is to be the center of the worship of the true God for the whole world (2:14; 45:14, 22 – 25; 66:18).

In the meantime God has his servants, who are dedicated to doing his will: the seraphim, who extol his holy name (6:2 – 3), and the prophet, who readily responds to his call (6:8). Israel had been called to this high standing as God’s servant (41:8 – 9; 44:1) but failed (42:19 – 20). Cyrus was to perform certain functions for God (44:28; 45:1), but it is the supreme Servant of the Lord who fulfills Israel’s destiny of taking light to the nations (42:6; 49:6; 52:14 – 15) out of his own profound experience of the darkness of suffering and death.Through his work will arise a seed (53:10), answering to the holy seed of his vision (6:13), who as his servants (54:17; 56:5; et al.) will form the nucleus of a society that reflects in its own glory the glory of the Lord (60:13).

4. ESCHATOLOGY

The message of Isaiah is strongly eschatological. There are many passages in which the prophet deals with the future destiny of Israel and of the Gentiles, a special feature being the range of material that has Jerusalem-Zion as its focus. W. J. Dumbrell maintains that Isaiah 1 is the key to the book, for it shows the religious and moral state of the nation in Isaiah’s day.[56]He writes: “The eschatology of the book of Isaiah aims at reversing the situation described in Isaiah 1. That is perhaps the reason for what seems a new introduction at Isaiah 2:1.”[57]He shows that throughout chs. 1 – 12 Zion is vulnerable (1:21; 10:28 – 32; cf. 24:10; 29:1 – 7; 32:13 – 14), but also that the Zion ideal will survive (7:1 – 9; 10:28 – 34; cf. 17:12 – 14; 29:8; 30:27 – 33; 31:1 – 9).[58]This is, of course, because of a continuing gracious purpose of God that will come to its fruition in due time. Certainly the picture of Zion with which the book ends is in sharp contrast with its condition as portrayed and indicted in ch. 1. Passages that relate

particularly to a great personal figure of the future, whether he is presented as king or servant, will be treated in our next section, though some reference to them here is inevitable.

Approaches to Interpretation

The book of Isaiah, like other OT prophetic Scriptures, has been understood in more than one way as far as its eschatology is concerned. Clearly, a high doctrine of Scripture requires us to take the teaching of its every part with great seriousness, and it also requires that we consider the way the NT writers understood it.

Some writers hold to the principle that every prophecy that can be taken literally should be so taken. This does not mean that there is no recognition of figurative language or the wide range of physical analogies used by the writers. It does mean, however, that Jerusalem is taken to be a geographical location, not a symbol for the church, that the wolf and the lamb lie down together in the Messiah's kingdom as literal animals, and so on.

Others interpret the bulk of the material spiritually and maintain that the promises made to Israel are to be fulfilled in the Church, so that we are not to think in terms of the physical realities themselves so much as the spiritual concepts they were designed to point to. This does not mean, of course, that none of the prophecies are to be taken literally. For instance, Christ did offer his back to those who would beat him (50:6).The key to spiritualization really lies in the formula, "For 'Israel' or 'Jerusalem' read 'the Church.' "

In the judgment of the present writer, both of these positions have difficulties in the light of the NT. On the one hand, a good case can be made for the fulfillment of many of the "Israel" prophecies in the Church, which is the thesis of O.T. Allis's *Prophecy and the Church*.[59]On the other hand, there are some NT passages, such as Matthew 19:28 and Luke 21:24,[60] that appear to refer to literal Israel and geographical Jerusalem. Another important passage is Romans 11:26 – 27, where a majority of commentators take "all Israel" to be a reference to the earthly nation.[61]This passage is particularly important because it quotes Isaiah

59:20 – 21 and 27:9. It is also difficult to take the consistently literal position, especially if this means the setting up of a temple and a sacrificial system again after Christ has made the final sacrifice.

The Relation of Promise to Fulfillment

The intermediate position between the extremes of literalism and spiritualization outlined and advocated above will seem unsatisfactory to some readers. They may say that as Israel and the Church are two different realities, it seems inconceivable that they should both be present in the prophecies of the same book and, apparently, without any clear indication of this duality being given in the book itself. There is force in this argument, but one important point must be borne in mind: the two are not completely distinct, for Jewish Chris tians belong to both. They enjoy the spiritual fulfillment of these promises; and, by a further manifestation of divine grace, Gentile Chris tians are also brought into the good of what was promised first to Israel. Promises given in Isaiah about the taking of light not just to the Jew but also to the Gentile (e.g., 42:6 – 7; 49:6 – 7) have this in view (Ac 13:46 – 48; 26:19 – 23). It is only unbelief that stops Jews from enjoying what can rightly be theirs in Christ.

Another objection made is that it seems on this basis we can never be certain how a particular part of the eschatological material is to be understood. This objection is, however, formulated in too extreme a way. In many cases the NT gives clear guidance. As suggested above, Acts 13:46 – 48; 26:19 – 23 interpret Isaiah 42:6 – 7; 49:6 – 7 spiritually; and in Galatians 4:25 – 27 Paul clearly applies Isaiah 54:1 to “the Jerusalem that is above,” the mother of all who by faith are children of Abraham. Isaiah 59:20 – 21, however, is taken literally, though it should be noted that Romans 11, where the latter is quoted, simply tells us that “all Israel” will be converted and saved, without specifying the mode of its existence as a saved people.

We can of course be sure that when a promise is made of conditions that fall short of perfection — as, for instance, when life is lengthened but death is not abolished (65:20) — this does not apply to the perfected church but is best related to millennial conditions. Also, pictures of judgment — even universal judgment — that threaten death to most, but not to all unbelievers (24:6 – 13),

must relate not to the ultimate judgment of the second death but to a great judgment on earth. On the other hand, references to “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17; 66:22) presuppose the advent of God’s new order, where all will be perfect and which, according to Revelation 21 – 22, lies beyond the millennium.

There may be passages that present us with continuing problems of interpretation, where it is not plain whether we should understand them literally or spiritually. Perhaps this is what we should expect. We are never promised complete understanding of biblical prophecies before their fulfillment.Their main purpose is to keep us expectant, obedient, and trustful and to provide, in their fulfillment, evidence of the faithfulness of God to his Word. In the fulfilled events themselves, God will be seen to be true.

One further possibility must be considered. Might a passage have two or even more meanings? Some writers are unhappy about this idea, probably fearing a return to the medieval type of multi-layered interpretation against which the Reformers reacted. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., for instance, restricts the term “meaning” to the sense intended by the author and uses “significance” for other applications that go beyond this basic sense.[62]Just as human speech, especially when it is poetic, may suggest further levels of significance beyond the meaning conveyed by the passage in its context, so may the Word of God.[63]In the light of the NT, where such applications occur often, would we be justified in saying that they express a divine meaning that goes beyond that of the human author?

The concept of typology is particularly helpful here.The offices and institutions of Israel provided shadows of which Christ was the substance, and prophecy itself — though often pointing to Christ — sometimes does so indirectly by its reference to a person or institution that is a type of him (see comments on 7:14 – 17 for an example). The millennium itself is earthly, and passages that relate primarily to it may also point beyond themselves to the ultimate divine order in the new creation.The Church, too, is imperfect, and its very imperfections are a cry for that perfected new order God will bring in due course. Thus, both millennial Israel and a profoundly blessed but constantly failing church anticipate what the inanimate creation itself mutely cries out for (Ro 8:18 – 25), the coming of God’s new universe in which all will bring glory to him.

5. MESSIANISM AND THE SERVANT SONGS

Most Christians, if asked what contribution the book of Isaiah makes within the total Word of God, would answer in terms of its extensive messianic teaching, yet, strange as it may seem, it is possible to sideline this. M. A. Sweeney, for example, suggests a brief overall structure for the book that, helpful as it is in other ways, makes no reference either to the kingly or the servant prophecies, therefore giving the impression (whether intended or not) that they are not central to the book's teaching.[64]

The term *messianic* requires definition, for it is sometimes used narrowly, sometimes broadly.When used in the narrowest sense, it applies to the hope among the Jews in intertestamental and NT times that God would raise up a divinely appointed king to deliver Israel from her enemies, along with anticipations of this hope in the OT. Sometimes it is broadened to refer to a range of OT prophecies of a king, priest, or prophet, or any combination of these, and sometimes is taken more broadly still to include figures such as Daniel's Son of Man and the Isaianic Servant of the Lord. Most broadly it is applied to visions of a bright future for Israel even when these visions make no reference to any special human figure. So what kind of messianism do we find in Isaiah? We will outline the approach to this of several different writers before suggesting a further one.

In his book *An Examination of Kingship and Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 1 – 35*, P. D. Wegner makes full examination of four passages traditionally thought to be messianic in the kingly sense (7:10 – 17; 8:23 – 9:6; 11:1 – 9; 32:1 – 8).[65]He maintains that the hope of a personal messiah existed well before the exile and that the shaping of the book of Isaiah in its final form clearly reflects this hope.

Three contributors to the book *The Lord's Anointed* address the issue. D. Schibler, dealing with "Messianism and Messianic Prophecy in Isaiah 1 – 12 and 28 – 33," sees Zion theology as crucially important for Isaiah, with God as the true King ruling in and through Zion by his representative.[66] This kind of

theology is found also in Psalms 72; 89; and 132. The reference to Zion's godly past in Isaiah 1:27 probably alludes to David and early Solomon, and justice and righteous ness are set as ideals for the future (28:16 – 17;32:16 – 17). These are hoped for in successive kings, but the hope proves vain. This dynastic type of messianic hope is, however, to be fulfilled through the Royal Child of 9:1 – 7 and 11:1 – 9, written when hope for the future was rekindled by the birth of an heir to the throne.

R. Schultz says that God is Israel's true King (Isa 6) and that all Judah's kings, even Hezekiah, are flawed.[67]There is, however, to be a coming Ruler who will fulfill all God's purposes. He contends that there is only one messianic figure in Isaiah, for he considers the Servant to be a servant-king. He shows that there are many links — thematic, textual, and contextual — between the King and the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah, so that, in his view, they are intended to be one person.

Somewhat different is the approach of G. Hugenberger, who argues for the unity of the Servant Songs with their context and shows that the "second exodus" theme pervades Isaiah 40 – 66.[68] The Servant has kingly and priestly qualities but is predominantly a prophet and is the new Moses (cf. Dt 18 and 34), whom Yahweh called "my servant." So here messianism goes behind David to Moses for its archetype.

This view should be distinguished from that of Baltzer, who points out the striking fact that in a work (chs. 40 – 55) whose theme is the exodus and in which the names of many OT characters appear, there is no reference to Moses, so that the Servant is in fact anonymous.[69]Considering many of the same features as Hugenberger, Baltzer concludes not that the Servant is a prophet like Moses but that he is Moses himself, so often called "the servant of the LORD." It is not easy, however, to see how the third and fourth songs can be applied to Moses himself. To support this Baltzer resorts to the dubious expedient of suggesting there may be Moses traditions not preserved in the canonical writings.

In his two commentaries J. A. Motyer, emphasizing the central importance of messanism in Isaiah, uses the terms, "the Book of the King" for chs. 1 – 37, "the Book of the Servant" for 38 – 55, and "the Book of the Anointed Conqueror" for

56 – 66.The portraits are complementary, and he finds many points of connection between them. He writes,“The king rules over the whole world, but how can he do so unless the servant opens the way for all who will come to feast and to enjoy the sure mercies of David (55:1 – 5) and until the conqueror creates a world free of opposition?”[70]Schultz, however, says that Motyer’s identification of Anointed Conqueror texts (59:21; 61:1 – 3; 61:10 – 62:7; 63:1 – 6) is uncertain, for Schultz thinks some may refer to Yahweh rather than to a messianic figure.[71]Perhaps we may suggest a slightly different approach, a threefold one, to this important issue.

The Thematic Approach

Many themes enter this prophetic literature that are messianic in a broad sense; that is, they witness to the Christ presented in the pages of the NT. We can deal only with some of the more important of these.

The theme of the *Branch* is an important one. God promised Abraham not only a seed but also a land (Ge 12:1 – 3), and this was to be a good land (Dt 11:8 – 12). If the people were obedient, the land would be fruitful. If they were disobedient, there would be barrenness (Dt 28) and ultimately their removal from it (Dt 29:28). In Isaiah’s day the Assyrians had devastated and stripped the Promised Land (1:7 – 9), and this was only an earnest of fuller judgment (7:23 – 25). God promised, however, the ultimate blessing of fruitfulness for the land (4:2; see comment there), and later this promise is filled out in many wonderful ways (ch. 35; 41:18 – 19; 55:12 – 13).

Yet God’s purpose is even more concerned with people than with plants, and so the theme of biological fruitfulness is applied to the people of Israel. This vineyard will become a wasteland (5:1 – 7); this tree will be felled (6:13). In God’s great purpose, however, the vineyard will eventually flourish as never before, filling the whole world with fruit (27:26); the holy seed that is Israel’s faithful remnant (6:13) will encapsulate the promise of the future. It is not only Israel that is to be reduced to a “stump” (6:13) but also the family of Jesse, the royal house of David (11:1), that suffered eclipse in the exile and thereafter seemed to have been set aside. Out of this stump would come the ultimate fruitful Branch, the messianic king (11:1 – 5), the source of true fruitfulness for

all, his reign bearing fruit in righteousness and peace (11:3 – 9; 32:1). If, as we will see, this King is also the Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53:2 takes up this "Branch" theme again; and the fourth Servant Song reveals that this fullness of life has great cost in suffering and death for him.

The term *Stone* occurs in several important passages. In the OT, God is often called a "rock" (e.g., Dt 32:4, 15, 18; Pss 18:2; 61:2), usually with implications of shelter and refuge. In 8:14 – 15 the prophet turns this familiar figure against the rebellious people. God the Rock is for his people who trust him but against those who refuse to believe, becoming a boulder to trip over in the darkness of sin. In 28:16 – 17 God promises to lay a tested (or testing) stone in Zion, again for faith. In 32:1 – 2 the (messianic) King becomes, in effect, a rock of refuge for his people (see comments on all three passages). So God has committed to the coming One the function of sheltering his people who trust him.

Light is an important concept in Isaiah. The people, forsaking the light of God's Word, are in great darkness (8:19 – 22); but light will in fact come to them in association with the advent of the Messiah (9:17). God the Light, like God the Rock, can confront his people with judgment (10:17); but eventually he will turn their darkness to light (30:26; 42:16; 58:8 – 11). This divine Light will shine over Zion and attract all the nations out of their darkness (60:1 – 3). This Light, coming in Isaiah 9 through the messianic child, is spread abroad (42:6 – 7; 49:6, 9) through the Lord's Servant. This suggests that passages such as 60:1 – 3 and 2:1 – 4 are implicitly messianic.

The ideas of the branch, stone, and light all move beyond their normal subpersonal uses to provide analogies of the Coming One and his work. In the use of the term *Child*, however, we begin at the personal level. The people of Israel are described as children reared by God but proving rebellious and so appearing more like the offspring of evildoers (1:2, 4). We are reminded of Deuteronomy, which emphasizes the upbringing of children and prescribes stoning for a rebellious son (Dt 21:18 – 21). Deuteronomy in fact is at one with Isaiah in its declaration that the Israelites no longer reveal their likeness to God their father (Dt 32:5). Literal children appear on the scene, for it will be a sign of God's judgment that the Israelites will be ruled by children (Isa 3:4 – 5, 12). The prophet's own progeny become signs and portents to Israel, for Shear-Jashub declares God's grace and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz his judgment (7:3; 8:1 – 4, 18).

An even more significant child appears in this context — Immanuel, the pledge of God's presence with his people (7:13 – 14; 8:8 – 10) for foreshadowing (see comments at 7:13 – 17) the messianic child of the fourfold name, the perfect expression of the divine fullness in the messianic King. He is not only the supreme Child, but in his reign every child will find significance and safety (11:6, 8).

What of the messianic *King* ? Isaiah had a wide experience of kings (1:1).The books of Kings used David as the standard of kingship (1Ki 11:33, 38; 15:3 – 5; et al.), though his imperfections come clearly into view in the books of Samuel. There was also a written standard in Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20; and judged by this, even Hezekiah — especially as he appears in Isaiah 39 — was a failure. In the year Uzziah died, Isaiah was given a vision of the perfect heavenly kingship, the very throne of Yahweh (ch. 6; cf. also 33:17, 21 – 22).The universal kingship of heaven leads us on to the earthly kingship of the human yet divine King of Isaiah 9 with the ever-increasing extension of his kingdom (9:6 – 7) until it becomes universal in the submission of the whole world (11:4, 9 – 10).

His kingship, so unlike that of the empirical kings of Isaiah's time, will be one of perfect righteous ness and peace (9:7; 11:39), which will include even the animal world. The Servant is said to bring forth justice to the nations and establish it in the earth (42:1, 4; 49:8), which suggests kingly functions and powers.Although a servant of rulers (49:7), the King's great suffering will lead to an overawed hush on the part of earthly kings (52:14 – 15), and to supremacy of the most absolute kind (52:13) and total victory (53:12) for him. It should be noted that 32:1 and 53:12 suggest the association of others in ruling with the King and the Servant, for the King has his people, the Servant his offspring.

The Servant Songs,[72]presenting God's *Servant*, were first identified by Duhm and considered by him to be the work of a different author from Deutero-Isaiah;[73]but it is because most modern scholars treat them as this author's work that they exclude 61:1 – 3, held to be the work of Trito-Isaiah. If we accept the unity of the book, perhaps even 63:1 – 6 should be included (cf. 61:2 with 63:4). Moreover, the earlier songs should probably be extended beyond the limits set by Duhm, with the first and second reaching at least to 42:7 and 49:9a, the third to the end of ch. 50. An examination of these passages shows the

appropriateness of this, and the comment at 48:16 presents the case for seeing a reference to the Servant there. Though clearly forming an identifiable series, they have not been arbitrarily introduced to their context; for the servant theme is an important one in Isaiah from ch. 41 onward, with Israel often so-named (41:8 – 9; 43:10; 44:12, 21) and, though often encouraged in such passages, also pronounced a failure (42:19 – 20). Cyrus, too, though not called God's servant, functions for him (44:28 – 45:7), with the prediction of God's prophetic servants (44:26) and the good of his servant Israel (45:4) as the background and the purpose of his work.

Who then is the Servant? The Chris tian, guided by the use made of the Servant Songs in the NT (e.g., in Mt 8:17; 12:17 – 21; Jn 12:38; Ac 8:30 – 35; et al.), is likely to immediately say, "Jesus." Certainly there is not a word of the songs that cannot be applied to him, even when the servant is called "Israel" (49:3); for, as Matthew clearly saw, Jesus was the perfect expression of what God intended Israel to be (cf. Mt 2:15 with Hos 11:1 – 2). Jewish interpreters have identified the Servant with Israel as a nation, the faithful remnant, ideal Israel, and various historical characters (including the prophet himself and Jeremiah). Modern scholars have shown the same diversity of outlook.

It is at first a surprise to find that Isaiah 49:6 is applied to Paul and Silas in Acts 13:47, whereas it is apparently applied to Christ in Acts 26:23, and that Isaiah 42:2 – 3 seems to have influenced the picture of the Christian servant of God in 2 Timothy 2:24 – 26. In fact, as we have seen already with the Branch concept, it looks as though Isaiah is gradually educating his readers as to the deep significance of the Servant.Viewed in the light of passages such as 41:8 – 10 and 43:8 – 10, which form part of its context, the first song could apply to Israel, though in the light of 42:18 – 20 hardly empirical Israel but perhaps Israel of the future, purged of sin.As Hugenberger points out, we must take note of language used of the servant, which is also, in this part of Isaiah, used of Israel (e.g., "whom I uphold," "my chosen," and "a light to the nations").[74]

For the application to Israel, 42:6 is a problem, for "the people" here clearly refers to Israel. Perhaps then, says the reader, the Servant is the faithful remnant so important in earlier chapters and now playing an important part in underscoring the relationship between the Lord and his people. This seems to be reinforced when we see the Servant both identified with and yet distinguished

from Israel in the second song (49:3, 5). Hugenberger, however, points out that the Servant is clearly differentiated from the repentant remnant of Israel in 42:3, 6; 49:8; and 53:8, and that in every case where the first person plural is used the prophet is speaking on behalf of Israel, so that the third singular in the same passages cannot also refer to Israel.[75]

In each of the songs the Servant is personalized; but in the third song the first person singular is completely dominant until verses 10 and 11, if they are to be reckoned part of the passage. He is taught, he suffers, he is vindicated, and he imparts God's truth to others, who are judged by their attitude toward him. There is not, in fact, in the third and fourth songs a single expression necessitating or even suggesting that the Servant is a group rather than an individual.

Is the Servant, then, as the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:34) suggested, the prophet himself? Some modern scholars think so.[76]Hugenberger assembles impressive evidence for this, but he then goes on to give even more impressive evidence to show that this identification is impossible![77]How, for instance, can the prophet be viewed as highly exalted (52:13; cf. 53:12) or as bringing forth justice in the earth (42:1 – 4)?Hugenberger then critically reviews evidence adduced for the idea that the Servant is a distinctively kingly or priestly figure, finding major problems with both before then presenting his own view that he is to be seen as a second Moses, which, he says, "justifies exactly the kind of blending of prophetic, royal and priestly features that is found."[78]Moreover, in ch. 53 his work is unique, for no one else in the OT, either within or outside Isaiah, dies as an atoning sacrifice for human sins.

It seems, therefore, that we have here a kind of pyramid pattern, such as Delitzsch discerned in the presentation of the Servant.[79]The Servant is first of all, outside the songs, Israel; then he is the remnant, the spiritual heart of Israel; then he is a unique person suffering unjustly at the hands of sinners and yet in fulfillment of the divine purpose of atonement. The earlier songs can be applied to Chris tians as they share, through his one sacrifice, the glad task of bringing light to the world. They cannot share his atoning work but are called to accept a destiny of suffering for his sake, to proclaim, as he did (61:1 – 2), his great salvation.

All these facts suggest that readers of the whole book of Isaiah are being

progressively educated. The aim is to lead them to recognize in the book a great Messiah/Servant of God figure (who is seen in the NT to be Jesus of Nazareth), but the method is one of gradual disclosure of this figure through the employment of a number of terms and pictures, which occur first of all in a modest way and gradually come to have richer and richer connotations. Martin Luther described the Psalter as a Bible in miniature. This description could be almost as well applied to the book of Isaiah, at least as far as its messianism is concerned. How privileged we are to be in such a school!

The Contrapuntal Approach

The prophet not only introduces a series of themes that prove eventually to be messianic, but, as we have seen to some extent already, he relates them in a kind of theological counterpoint. This is, of course, a feature of some NT Christological passages — for example in Matthew 16:13 – 20, where the terms "Son of Man," "Christ," "Son of the living God," and perhaps even "Rock" are all applied to Jesus. John 1 is another passage crammed with Christological titles.

There are many examples of this in Isaiah. For instance, in chs. 8 – 9 we have the sanctuary (8:14; cf. Jn 2:19), the stone (Isa 8:14), the light (9:2), and the child-king (9:7). The kingly theme is interwoven with that of the servant (e.g., 42:4; 52:13; 53:12), while both the king and the servant are endowed with the Spirit of God (11:1 – 3; 42:1; 61:1). We have already seen how the branch theme interlocks with others. This all gives the impression that some great person is in view, someone in whom all this material will find its ultimate focus.

The Programmatic Approach

Elsewhere I have attempted to show that Luke 2:25 – 35 is not only saturated with Isaianic thought and language but that it implies a definite messianic program.[80] The prophecy of Isaiah itself seems to contain a program, corresponding in many amazing ways to the NT presentation of Christ. Isaiah 1 – 5 presents the great spiritual need of the people of Israel. In our Lord's day

there was a faithful remnant (cf. Isa 1:9 and Ro 9:29); but for many the excessive emphasis on sacrifice had been replaced by a similar phenomenon — Pharisaic legalism. Isaiah 6 is related to Christ in John 12:37 – 41, and we see the condescension of this great divine King in his birth from a virgin (Mt 1:22 – 23) and in his ultimate destiny of Davidic kingship and universal dominion in chs. 7; 9; and 11, with a glimpse of the Galilean ministry in 9:1 (cf. Mt 4:15 – 16).

Awaiting not only Israel but also the nations (chs. 13 – 23) — and indeed the whole world (ch. 24) — is divine judgment for sin, and so all are in dire need of him. After a number of chapters with occasional Christological foreshadowings, we hear the voice of the forerunner in Isaiah 40:3 – 5 (cf. Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4 – 6; Jn 1:23). In Isaiah 42 his ministry is perhaps viewed from the perspective of his baptism, for verse 1, along with Psalm 2:7, is often seen in the words from heaven spoken at that baptism. Matthew 12:18 – 21 applies the passage to his ministry. Isaiah 49, however, seems to be viewing that ministry in retrospect, for in it he has glorified God and proved to be the true Israel. His ministry to Israel is now to be complemented by a wider ministry to the nations.

In Isaiah 50 we see that the contents of Jesus' teaching ministry were determined by God through his daily fellowship with him (an emphasis of the gospel of John); but a personal destiny of shame, fulfilled in the trials, was also revealed. Earlier passages have spoken of his reign, and the fourth song commences with an emphatic assertion of his coming exaltation. It then expounds his sufferings and death in terms of sacrifice and substitution before closing with a renewed emphasis on triumph.

Isaiah 54 – 56 remind us of the joyful preaching of the gospel, grounded in the sacrifice and triumph of Christ, in which it is seen as the good news of God to the barren, the hungry, the thirsty, and the spiritually disadvantaged. Chapter 61 is applied to Christ in Luke 4:17 – 19. Here he is the representative preacher and so the preacher's ideal. Isaiah 63 takes up themes from chapter 61, with the emphasis now more on vengeance than redemption. Christ, as proclaimed in the gospel, must be embraced as Savior or faced as Judge. In Isaiah 65 – 66 we are reminded of the book of Revelation, which also proclaims the advent of a new creation but also, as here, ends on a note of grave solemnity. If he is all that Isaiah has shown him to be, to remain in sin dooms people to the ultimate horror.

6. STRUCTURE

Any visitor to the Acropolis in Athens can see that aesthetic gifts of a high order may be used in the service of deities that are not worthy of it, but the aesthetic can also be a good servant of the spiritual. This is certainly the case in Isaiah, where language of great beauty is made the vehicle of divine truth. In fact, in parts of the book the language is so sublime that the aesthetically sensitive reader sometimes has to remind himself or herself that all this beauty does not exist for its own sake but that it is the *meaning* of the words that is all important. There is also a beauty to the structure of the book.

Although chronology may have played some part in the arrangement of the oracles, this does not seem to have been the chief factor. Over one hundred years ago, Duhm pointed to the similarity of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, each commencing with indigenous judgment oracles, followed by oracles of judgment against the nations, and ending with oracles of salvation. Most scholars now see the chief organizing factor to be thematic.

Isaiah's divinely revealed theology, eschatology, and Christology (see the appropriate sections above) contribute in major ways to that structure, with his concept of God as the most basic factor of all. As we have noted above (p. 446), Isaiah's distinctive designation of God was "the Holy One of Israel," and this stands both for his majesty and character on the one hand and for his special relationship with an insignificant people in western Asia on the other. This relationship, given the fact of sin, clearly implies grace but cannot deny his holiness, so that the people with whom he has established a special link — as well as those nations that have no such relationship — must feel the power of his judgment.

In Isaiah's day, God's people lived in an area threatened by Assyria, which menaced every nation in the area and conquered Samaria, the capital of Israel/Ephraim. After Isaiah's death, a political and military shift of power replaced Assyria by Babylon. Jerusalem, threatened but not taken by Assyria, was overcome by the Babylonians. In chs. 1 – 35 Assyria is the dominant political background; and in chs. 40 – 66, Babylon, while chs. 36 – 39 provide a transition from the one to the other. Dominating all, however, is Israel's God, whose purposes of judgment and salvation are served by these two powers and

by others (notably Cyrus the Persian). In this section of the history of western Asia, the reader is repeatedly reminded of the wider setting, God's purposes of judgment on the whole world (e.g., ch. 24) and his saving purpose for Israel forming the heart of a plan of blessing for the whole world (e.g., chs. 2; 60).

P. Ackroyd shows that chs. 1 – 12 alternate between promise and threat, so that this section prepares for chs. 13 – 29, mainly threat, and chs. 40 – 66, mainly promise.[81]A. J. Tomasino has successfully shown that the opening and closing sections of the book contain much vocabulary and many themes in common and that these themes occur in the same order in each of these sections. We cannot detail this here but recommend the interested reader to consult this valuable article.[82]E. Conrad highlights the comparison and contrast between the narratives focused on two kings, Ahaz (ch. 7) and Hezekiah (chs. 35 – 39), both challenged to put their faith in Yahweh and his word and both told not to be afraid.[83]Oswalt also notes that the trustworthiness of God is the major theme of chs. 7 – 39.[84]

Chapters 1 – 35, with their focus on God's people against the background of Assyria, may be analyzed in several ways. It is, however, clear that a threefold analysis develops the theme of God's purpose for his people in three variations. Chapters 1 – 12 focus on Judah and Jerusalem. Their sin and consequent judgment are emphatically delivered, but this already insignificant people will have a glorious destiny; they are to be the center of the knowledge of God for the whole world. A small remnant and the messianic child come into focus, and they comprise God's plan to demonstrate his holy control of history.

Chapters 13 – 27 (falling into natural subdivisions, chs. 13 – 23 and 24 – 27) focus first on the individual nations of western Asia, beginning with Babylon (the power yet future) and Assyria (the current power). This section includes both Israelite kingdoms. God decrees judgment on each nation (although sometimes, even in relation to a foreign nation such as Egypt in ch. 19, with touches of grace also), and this is followed by a picture of universal judgment and an assurance that God's purpose for his people will triumph through their restoration. It is clear that as all these nations face the threat of judgment, Judah would be foolish to repose its trust in any of them instead of having faith in God alone.

Chapters 28 – 35 also fall into two sections (chs. 28 – 33 and 34 – 35). First of all, we have the solemn reminder (reminiscent of much in chs. 1 – 12) of the rebellious sin of God's people, especially their failure to hear him and to trust him, but with further reminders also of his purpose to bless them. G. Stansell seeks to show that these chapters have structural links with each of the other main sections of the book (esp. with chs. 1 – 12).[85]Chapters 34 and 35 recapitulate chs. 13 – 27, showing the judgment of the whole world, while making it clear that this includes particular nations (represented by Edom) and celebrating in glowing praise the triumph of God's redemptive grace for his people. In other words, the reader who has followed the whole sequence of oracles from chs. 1 – 35 has been taught, by repetition of theme with variation of treatment, the great truths implicit in the phrase "the Holy One of Israel."

Chapters 1 – 35 emphasize the need for faith and the folly of trust in the flesh. This theme continues in the transitional chapters, 36 – 39. Many recent authors have emphasized the importance of these chapters and their role as a bridge between the Assyrian and Babylonian sections of the book.The mixture of faith and unbelief, so often characterizing God's people, assumes flesh and blood in the person of Hezekiah, so trustful in Jerusalem's great crisis and yet so compromising in his relations with Babylonia. So the scene is set for the chapters to follow.

Like chs. 1 – 35, chs. 40 – 66 belong together and yet have a threefold structure. Chapters 40 – 48 present the people in their future state under Babylon's domination. Yet the sovereign Holy One of Israel has not forgotten his purpose for the remnant of his people.There is strong emphasis on his uniqueness and control of history especially in the advent of Cyrus. Just as God had done in Egypt, so now he will overthrow the deities of the tyrant empire Assyria. The messianic theme reappears in a new form in the introduction of the Servant of the Lord (ch. 42).

Chapters 49 – 55 are dominated by the Servant and his ministry not only to Israel but also to that wider world that has been so much in view earlier. Atonement through substitution is described, celebrated, and proclaimed.

Chapters 56 – 66 explore the final issues of salvation and judgment, with the Servant as the supreme agent of both (chs. 61; 63). The ultimate glory of Zion

(ch. 60) is to be set in the context of a new creation (ch. 66), but the book ends with the prophetic realism of a warning to the impenitent (66:24).

We should always be open to fresh understanding of the structure of a lengthy biblical book. There is, for instance, a difference of opinion between Motyer and Schultz concerning the structuring of chs.49 – 66. Motyer makes the main break between chs. 55 and 56 (as we have seen above), while Schultz, following Delitzsch, sees the division as coming between chs. 57 and 58. It is true that there does seem to be some sense of climax in ch. 55, but it is also true that the repetition of 48:22 at 57:21 (cf. also 66:24) seems significant. It is, in fact, possible to accept either analysis of the structure, for there appear to be structural elements of different sorts present in these chapters.

Does this matter? Is it not what we might expect? Often in great works of art there are overlapping structures because the whole work is so rich that it may be looked at in more than one way. The desire for one unified analysis appears to be modern and Western. If, as Motyer suggests at one point,[86]a subtopic from one section of Isaiah often becomes the major theme in the next section, can we be sure that we are always marking an important point of division intended by the prophet? If there is one great overarching theme, may its exposition not take up a number of overlapping themes and sections? To insist on one structure may be to apply Western literary categories where they may not be appropriate.

7. CANONICITY

Written prophecies by Isaiah existed by the time of Chronicles (see 2Ch 32:32), and this is usually placed around 400 BC. Sirach (Eccleisaisticus), early in the second century, referred to the inspiration of Isaiah;and there is much evidence from Qumran and from rabbinic sources, as well as from the NT, that the book was regarded as canonical both before and in NT times. The book has always been highly regarded within the Chris tian church, especially for its testimony to Christ.

8. TEXT

The Masoretic Text (MT) of Isaiah, the only text available until modern times, seems to have been well preserved, for it presents comparatively few major difficulties. The main Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX), occasionally diverges from it; but only rarely do these divergences alter the meaning of the text in any significant way. The Aramaic Targum sometimes agrees with the LXX but more often with the MT.The Syrian and Vulgate versions, while interesting, are of less value and in general support the MT.

The discovery of two manuscripts of Isaiah (1QIsaa and 1QIsab) at Qumran was an event of major textual importance. Here were two manuscripts of an important OT book about one thousand years older than the MT, almost certainly to be dated before the birth of Christ, and one of them (1QIsaa) complete.Particularly important is the fact that they appear to be earlier than the standardization of the text of the OT, which, according to the Talmud, took place about AD 100. These scrolls show a large measure of agreement with the MT, thus revealing the extreme care with which the text of the book must have been copied by the scribes over the centuries; but there are occasional interesting agreements with the LXX.The majority of variations from the MT are, however, in spelling and make no real difference to the text.[87]

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10. OUTLINE

I. Oracles Concerning Judah and Jerusalem (1:1 – 12:6)
A. God's Charge against His People (1:1 – 31)
B. The Exaltation of God's House and the Extension of His Dominion (2:1 – 5)
C. The Day of the Lord (2:6 – 22)
D. God's Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah (3:1 – 4:1)
E. Zion's Glorious Future (4:2 – 6)
F. The Parable of the Vineyard (5:1 – 7)
G. Condemnation of Judah's Sins (5:8 – 30)
H. The Vision and Call of the Holy One (6:1 – 13)
I. The Sign of Shear-Jashub (7:1 – 9)
J. The Sign of Immanuel (7:10 – 25)
K. The Sign of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:1 – 10)
L. Isaiah and His Children as Signs and Wonders (8:11 – 18)
M.The Light and the Child (8:19 – 9:7)
N. The Judgment of Ephraim (9:8 – 10:4)
O. The Judgment of Assyria (10:5 – 19)
P. The Deliverance of the Lord's Remnant (10:20 – 34)
Q. The Davidic King and His Benign Reign (11:1 – 9)
R. The Nation and the Nations (11:10 – 16)
S. A Song of Joyous Praise (12:1 – 6)
II. God and the Nations (13:1 – 23:18)

A. Prophecy against Babylon (13:1 – 14:23)
B. Prophecy against Assyria (14:24 – 27)
C. Prophecy against Philistia (14:28 – 32)
D. Prophecy against Moab (15:1 – 16:14)
E. Prophecy against Damascus (and Ephraim) (17:1 – 14)
F. Prophecy against Cush (18:1 – 7)
G. Prophecy against Egypt (19:1 – 25)
H. Prophecy against Egypt and Cush (20:1 – 6)
I. Prophecy against Babylon (21:1 – 10)
J. Prophecy against Edom (21:11 – 12)
K. Prophecy against Arabia (21:13 – 17)
L. Prophecy against Jerusalem (22:1 – 25)
M.Prophecy against Tyre (23:1 – 18)
III. God and the Whole World (24:1 – 27:13)
A. The Judgment of the World (24:1 – 23)
B. Psalms and Predictions of Judgment and Salvation (25:1 – 12)
C. Praise, Prayer, and Prophecy (26:1 – 21)
D. The Restoration of Israel (27:1 – 13)
IV. God and His People (28:1 – 33:24)
A. Woe to Samaria (28:1 – 29)
B. Woe to Ariel (29:1 – 24)
C. Woe to the Rebellious Children (30:1 – 33)
D. Woe to Those Who Seek Help from Egypt (31:1 – 9)
E. God's Kingdom and the Triumph of Righteousness (32:1 – 20)
F. Woe to the Destroyer (33:1 – 24)
V. God's Purposes of Judgment and Salvation (34:1 – 35:10)
A. Judgment on the World — and Edom (34:1 – 17)
B. Blessing for God's People (35:1 – 10)
VI. Isaiah and Hezekiah, Assyria and Babylon (36:1 – 39:8)
A. The Deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib (36:1 – 37:38)
B. Hezekiah's Illness (38:1 – 22)
C. Envoys from and Exile to Babylonia (39:1 – 8)
VII. The Sole Sovereignty and Sure Promises of the Lord (40:1 – 48:22)
A. Good News for Jerusalem (40:1 – 11)
B. God the Incomparable (40:12 – 31)
C. God the Lord of History for His People (41:1 – 29)
D. The Lord's Servant — the Perfect and the Defective (42:1 – 25)
E. Grace Abounding and Despised (43:1 – 28)
F. Israel's Great God and the Folly of Idolatry (44:1 – 23)

G. God's Actions through Cyrus (44:24 – 45:25)
H. Babylon's Ineffectual Idols and the Lord Almighty (46:1 – 13)
I. The Fall of Proud Babylon (47:1 – 15)
J. Israel's Stubbornness and God's Purpose of Grace (48:1 – 22)
VIII. The Gospel of the Servant of the Lord (49:1 – 55:13)
A. The Lord's Servant and the Restoration of Israel (49:1 – 26)
B. Israel's Sin and the Servant's Obedience (50:1 – 11)
C. Listen! Awake! Depart! (51:1 – 52:12)
D. The Man of Sorrows and His Vindication (52:13 – 53:12)
E. God's Glorious Future for Jerusalem (54:1 – 17)
F. The Universality, Generosity, Urgency, and Effectiveness of God's Gracious Word (55:1 – 13)
IX. God as Judge and Savior (56:1 – 66:24)
A. Salvation Extended to the Disadvantaged (56:1 – 8)
B. God's Message to the Wicked (56:9 – 57:21)
C. The True Fast (58:1 – 14)
D. Sin, Sorrow, and Salvation (59:1 – 21)
E. The Future Glory of Zion (60:1 – 22)
F. The Year of the Lord's Favor (61:1 – 11)
G. Assured Prayer for Zion's Future (62:1 – 12)
H. The Lord the Avenger (63:1 – 6)
I. A Psalm of Praise and Lamentation (63:7 – 64:12)
J. The Great Final Issues (65:1 – 66:24)

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43. H. G. M.Williamson, “Hope under Judgment:The Prophets of the Eighth Century BCE,” *EQ* 72 (2000): 298, n.5.

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45. See esp. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 29 – 30, where he refers to major theological themes found both in chapters 1 – 39 and in 40 – 66.

46. Franke, *Isaiah 46,47 and 48*, 262.

47. See Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 22.

48. E. J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London: Tyndale, 1949), 206.

49. Ibid.

50. C. Seitz, *Zion’s Final Destiny:The Development of the Book of Isaiah: A Reassessment of Isaiah 36 – 39* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 9.

51. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah*, 51 – 80.

52. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah*, 2.

53. There is a fine summary of the theology of Isaiah by J. Oswalt in *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester:InterVarsity Press, 2000), 217 – 23.

54. F.W. Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981).

55. J. Barton, *Isaiah 1 – 39* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1995), 58.

56. W. J. Dumbrell, “The Purpose of the Book of Isaiah,” *TynBul* 36 (1985): 114.

57. Ibid., 116.

58. Ibid., 117.

59. O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1964).

60. For a survey of the interpretative possibilities of the former, see the appropriate sections in R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); for the latter, see comments on Luke 21:24 in I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), or D. L. Bock, *Luke 9:51 – 24:53* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

61. See the discussion in L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Pillar; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

62. See the discussion in W. C. Kaiser Jr., “Legitimate Hermeneutics,” in N. L. Geisler, ed., *Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1979), 133 – 38, and also, with criticism of Kaiser, T. Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 63 – 68.

63. There are, of course, times when alternative meanings may be appropriate within the context itself. So, especially in 2 Corinthians, Paul sometimes appears to use ambiguous words or phrases because both senses are part of the full truth; e.g., in 2 Corinthi ans 3:18, he uses a word that may mean either “behold” or “reflect,” perhaps intending us to understand that beholding and refl ecting Christ are spiritually inseparable facts.

64. M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1 – 4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* (BZAW 171; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 96 – 97.

65. P. D. Wegner, *An Examination of Kingship and Messianic Expectation in Isaiah 1 – 35* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1992).

66. D. Schibler, “Messianism and Messianic Prophecy in Isaiah 1 – 12 and 28 – 33,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 87 – 104.

67. R. Schultz, “The King in the Book of Isaiah,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 141 – 65.

68. G. Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure,” in *The Lord’s Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* , ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Carlisle:Paternoster, 1995), 105 – 40.

69. K. Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40 – 55* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 125 – 26.

70. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 13.

71. Schultz, “The King in the Book of Isaiah,” 144.

72. The term, although conventional, is not really apt, for there is no evidence they were ever sung. David Clines, writing about the Fourth Song (*I, He,We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1976], 11) makes a point that applies to them all when he says that the term is best avoided,“since it raises too many extraneous issues, and, what is worse, determines that we approach the poem with an already fixed frame of reference.”

73. B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaia* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1922), 7.

74. Hugenberger,“The Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Isaiah,” 107 – 8.

75. Ibid., 109 – 10.

76. See, e.g., R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40 – 66* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1975), 171 – 83.

77. Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the Servant Songs of Isaiah,” 111 – 14.

78. Ibid., 114 – 139 (quote on 119).

79. F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1890), 2:174.

80. G.W. Grogan, “The Light and the Stone: A Christological Study in Luke and Isaiah,” in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 157 – 67.

81. P. Ackroyd, *Isaiah 1 – 12: Presentation of a Prophet* (VTSup 29; Leiden: Brill, 1978).

82. A. J. Tomasino, “Isaiah 1:1 – 2:4 and 63 – 66 and the Composition of the Isaianic Corpus,” *JSOT* 57 (1993): 81 – 98.

83. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah*, 38 – 44. See also G. W. Menzies, “To What Does Faith Lead? The Two-stranded Textual Tradition of Isaiah 7:9b,” *JSOT* 80 (1998): 116 – 17.

84. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40 – 66* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 297.

85. G. Stansell, “Isaiah 28 – 33: Blest be the Tie that Binds [Isaiah Together],” in *New Visions of Isaiah* , ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney (JSOPSup 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 68 – 103.

86. Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, 15.

87. For more detailed treatment of this whole question, see W. S. LaSor, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” *EBC* (Grand Rapids:Zondervan, 1979), 1:395 – 405, and the references cited there.

Text and Exposition

I. ORACLES CONCERNING JUDAH AND JERUSALEM (1:1 – 12:6)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 1 – 12, because of their biographical features, have been well called the "Memoirs of Isaiah," though the title is sometimes restricted to a smaller passage, such as 6:1 – 8:18. Except perhaps for ch. 1, Isaiah's "Memoirs" appear to belong to an early period of the prophet's ministry, during the reigns (probably) of Jotham (750 – 731 BC) and (certainly) of Ahaz (735 – 715 BC).

Some scholars, notably A. H. Bartelt (*The Book around Immanuel: Style and Structure in Isaiah 2 – 12* [BJS 4; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996]), view chs. 2 – 12 as a literary unit. A study of Bar-telt's argument even in broad outline would take up far too much space here, but the following conclusion from his studies is well worth noting (243): "Chaps. 2 – 4, as a whole, introduce chaps.2 – 12. They announce a future and a hope, but only after the present situation has been dealt with.The theme of future restoration is picked up again . . . in 10:5 – 12:6, but only after the present situation described in 5:1 – 10:4 has been dealt with,"and he goes on to write of "the focus of the entire literary unit upon the present situation, namely, the fearful and faithless response of Ahaz to the Syro-Ephraimite threat." This is the situation now specifically addressed by the book.

A. God's Charge against His People (1:1 – 31)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 1 opens the book in a most appropriate fashion. Vigorously and with many a memorable phrase it sums up the teaching not only of Isaiah but also of the whole prophetic movement. This is widely agreed by scholars who take quite different views as to the authorship of the book. M. A.Sweeney (*Isaiah 1 – 4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* [BZAW 171; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988]), for example, after a full discussion, writes (186):

> Isaiah 1 is the prologue to the entire book in its present form. It presents YHWH's offer of redemption to the people and thus serves as an exhortation which summarizes the message of the entire book . . .. By portraying the contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked, the chapter attempts to convince the people to choose the path of righteousness so that they will share in the coming redemption of Zion.

Deuteronomy also sharply distinguishes the paths and consequences of obedience and disobedience (e.g., Dt 28), and there are many points of connection with Isaiah 1, as the commentary will show. Its frank presentation of these alternatives reminds us also of Psalm 1 and its function as an introduction to the Psalter. Proverbs, too, in passage after passage clearly distinguishes the righteous way of wisdom and the unrighteous way of folly.

Isaiah 1 evinces clear thematic unity, and the ordinary reader is unlikely to detect any disjointedness in thought. To see it as a series of distinct oracles linked by "catchwords" and assembled here to provide a fitting introduction seems hardly necessary, though this view of the chapter is widely held. In fact, the chapter abounds in literary devices such as assonance, alliteration, word-order emphasis, and so on (cf. comments on vv.2 – 3 below). Moreover, material linked by catchwords is not necessarily composite, as a glance at James 1 will reveal. Some of the word-idea links run through much of the chapter.They include not only a theological motif (e.g., rebellion — vv.2, 5, 20, 23, 28) but also a recurrent visual image, such as burden-bearing, suggested by the reference in v.3 to domestic beasts and developed in vv.4, 14, 24, in the last of which it is represented in the English by "get relief." Such features make oracular unity

more likely than the activity of a later redactor, although the combination by Isaiah himself of some originally distinct oracles cannot be excluded.

If ch. 1 is a unity, substantially at least, what is its date? Because of their conviction that the oracles in chs. 1 – 39 are arranged in approximate chronological order, Hayes and Irvine, 70, say that it comes from the time of the devastating earthquake in Uzziah's reign (Am 1:1; Zec 14:5) but without giving any evidence for this. The period of the Syro-Ephraimite threat to Judah (735 – 732 BC) has had its advocates, but most recent scholars favor the time of Sennacherib's invasion (701 BC). The description of Jerusalem isolated and beleaguered in vv.7 – 9 (see comment there) harmonizes so well with Sennacherib's own description.

Seitz, 23, sees the chapter as a summary recapitulation of Isaiah's vision relevant to the period mentioned at 1:1, probably summarizing his preaching from a penitential perspective following the 701 deliverance. Motyer (1993, in loc.) is correct, however, when he says of the oracles recorded here, "Their significance does not arise from their historical setting but from their searching exposure of sin and its consequences in the people of God."

This is essentially the view of R. F. Melugin ("Figurative Speech and the Reading of Isaiah 1,"in *New Visions of Isaiah*, ed. R. F. Melugin and M. A. Sweeney [JSOTSup 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], 282 – 305). On page 285 Melugin refers to Ricoeur's differentiation of the functions of oral and written discourse and says that in the latter, author and reader do not normally occupy the same situations of space and time, but the text can still address the reader, and, if it is biblical, as God's word to him. He points out that the metaphors of the law court and of eating dominate vv.2 – 20 and then are replaced by that of the unfaithful bride in vv.21 – 31. He goes on to say (291), "A funeral lament is sung over a city metaphorically portrayed as a once-faithful wife turned harlot." Then he shows how this picture of the unfaithful bride is set within the metaphor of a funeral (291 – 92). So here is "metaphor within metaphor." Then the metaphor moves. The city is purified and then becomes faithful again. This ends at v.26.

1 The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the
reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2 Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth!

For the LORD has spoken:
“I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
3 The ox knows his master,
the donkey his owner’s manger,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand.”
4 Ah, sinful nation,
a people loaded with guilt,
a brood of evildoers,
children given to corruption!
They have forsaken the LORD;
they have spurned the Holy One of Israel
and turned their backs on him.
5 Why should you be beaten anymore?
Why do you persist in rebellion?
Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.
6 From the sole of your foot to the top of your head
there is no soundness —
only wounds and welts
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged
or soothed with oil.
7 Your country is desolate,
your cities burned with fire;
your fields are being stripped by foreigners
right before you,
laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.
8 The Daughter of Zion is left
like a shelter in a vineyard,
like a hut in a field of melons,
like a city under siege.
9 Unless the LORD Almighty
had left us some survivors,
we would have become like Sodom,
we would have been like Gomorrah.
10 Hear the word of the LORD ,
you rulers of Sodom;
listen to the law of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!
11 “The multitude of your sacrifices —
what are they to me?” says the LORD.
“I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure
in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

12 When you come to appear before me,
who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings!
Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations —
I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
14 Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts
my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me;
I am weary of bearing them.
15 When you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even if you offer many prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are full of blood;
16 wash and make yourselves clean.
Take your evil deeds
out of my sight!
Stop doing wrong,
17 learn to do right!
Seek justice,
encourage the oppressed.
Defend the cause of the fatherless,
plead the case of the widow.
18 “Come now, let us reason together,”
says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.
19 If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
20 but if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.”
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.
21 See how the faithful city
has become a harlot!
She once was full of justice;
righteousness used to dwell in her —
but now murderers!
22 Your silver has become dross,
your choice wine is diluted with water.
23 Your rulers are rebels,
companions of thieves;
they all love bribes
and chase after gifts.

They do not defend the cause of the fatherless;
the widow's case does not come before them.

24 Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
the Mighty One of Israel, declares:
"Ah, I will get relief from my foes
and avenge myself on my enemies.

25 I will turn my hand against you;
I will thoroughly purge away your dross
and remove all your impurities.

26 I will restore your judges as in days of old,
your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you will be called
the City of Righteousness,
the Faithful City."

27 Zion will be redeemed with justice,
her penitent ones with righteousness.

28 But rebels and sinners will both be broken,
and those who forsake the LORD will perish.

29 "You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks
in which you have delighted;
you will be disgraced because of the gardens
that you have chosen.

30 You will be like an oak with fading leaves,
like a garden without water.

31 The mighty man will become tinder
and his work a spark;
both will burn together,
with no one to quench the fire."

COMMENTARY

1 Opinions vary as to whether this heading is for ch. 1 or the whole book. Comparison with the openings of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah tend to support the view that the whole book is intended, though at least chs. 40 – 55 may belong to the reign of Manasseh (see Introduction, p. 447).Motyer (1999, in loc.) points out that the names "Jerusalem" and "Zion" occur nearly one hundred times in the sixty-six chapters and that these occurrences are evenly spread.

Isaiah's name means "Yahweh is salvation." His father was not the prophet Amos (the names are quite different in Hebrew), and the Jewish tradition of his royal birth is virtually groundless (though he certainly had an extensive experience of kings!).His knowledge of their imperfections fitted him to be a major channel of God's disclosure of the perfect king.

"Vision" (cf. Ob 1; Na 1:1) suggests to the reader a mode of revelation, but it could be a technical term for an oracle of God, however received.Nahum's three chapters are described as "the book of the vision of Nahum the Elkoshite," and in the light of increasing recognition of the thematic unity of Isaiah an overall description of the book as a vision, although unusual, would not seem inappropriate. Sweeney (in loc.) points out the importance of noting the future orientation of the term "vision" and the fact that the book predicts the eventual restoration of Judah and Jerusalem and its significance for the world.

2 – 3 These two verses appear to introduce a trial scene. Is the true background ordinary Semitic legal practice or ancient Near Eastern covenantal lawsuits? Or are we rather to see here the influence of the wisdom tradition on a prophet? The last is likely only if we isolate these two verses from the rest of the chapter and focus attention on the parable in v.3, for v.2 is not really instruction given to sons (cf. Pr 2:1; 3:1, 11, 21; et al.) but a complaint made against them. The parallel with Deuteronomy 32:1 – 43 (cf. Mic 6:1 – 2; Ps 50:4) suggests that the hearers may well have been reminded of the Sinaitic covenant by the form of the prophet's address.

Here nature serves the purposes of prophecy.The heavens and earth witness

God's complaint against his people (so apt in a prophetic book which, in ch. 24 for example, embraces the whole cosmos), and the ox and the donkey dumbly rebuke Israel's ingratitude. Unreasoning beasts (Pr 7:22) exhibit more sense and appreciation than unthinking Israel (cf. Jer 8:7). As O. Kaiser (in loc.) puts it, "The ox and the ass *know* their masters, that is, they associate with them on terms of trust and obedience" (emphasis his).That the words "children" and "they" are both emphatic in the Hebrew underlines the unthinkable character of such filial rebellion. Perhaps the first readers of Isaiah would recall the legislation in Deuteronomy 21:18 – 21, which prescribed death by stoning as the penalty for an incorrigibly rebellious son (see Darr, 83).

Whedbee, 42 – 43, makes this comment:

> Coming on the heels of the opening call to heaven and earth, the two indictments of verses 2b and 3 show the complexity of Isaiah's language. Here he skilfully places two different genres — legal complaint and didactic parable — and two different metaphors — father/son and ass/ox — in a back-to-back position; yet at the same time he implies an inner affinity between the two.. . .The passage is an impressive example of the variety of language Isaiah can tap for his message.

And this is but an earnest of the riches to come!

4 The rich Hebrew vocabulary of words for sin appears here. The prophet's language suggests that guilt is an awful burden; that if paternity is truly revealed in character, something has gone sadly wrong (cf. Dt 32:5); and that the people have added insult to ingratitude. Could Isaiah's thought here be reflected in our Lord's indictment of the Pharisees as children not of Abraham or of God but of Satan (Jn 8:39 – 44)? The important phrase "Holy One of Israel" is discussed in the Introduction (p. 446).

5 – 6 The sinful people are addressed directly here.Their continuance in sin, like all rebellion against God, is utterly irrational. The whole surface of the body politic (i.e., the nation personified) testifies to the divine punishment, but the heart remains unchanged. Deuteronomy 28:35 is an instructive parallel, although the condition of the body there was due to disease, not to scourging.

7 – 9 Using rich language resources, the prophecy replaces metaphor (vv.5 – 6) with literal statement, which in its turn is followed by vivid simile. As Isaiah uttered these words, he may well have recalled the divine disclosure of things to

come given to him at his call (6:11 – 13). God's word had proved true.City and country were both suffering, their inhabitants powerless against the invaders. "Right before you" (v.7) suggests perhaps a scene visible because it lay just beyond the city walls. Sennacherib said of Hezekiah (*ANET*, 288), "Himself I made a prisoner in Jerusalem . . . like a bird in a cage." Isaiah likened the situation in the land to the roughly-made shelters of the farmer's watchmen, standing desolate against the skyline once harvest was over (v.8).

Once before southern Canaan had witnessed a scene of utter desolation (Ge 19:24 – 29), at that time even more thorough. It was the restraining hand of "the LORD Almighty" (NASB, "LORD of hosts," suggestive of comprehensive authority and fullness of resources) that alone saved Jerusalem from sharing the fate of its environs, and the prophet stressed this by placing the names of the two destroyed cities in a position of emphasis (v.9).

10 – 15 Here the prophet begins to focus on the leaders of the people. Watts (in loc.) points out that here (and in vv.16 – 17) Yahweh, announced by a herald, speaks "in the style of a teacher giving instruction." Sodom and Gomorrah — shocking and deeply insulting names to Isaiah's hearers — suggest not only devastation through fire by the hand of God (cf. v.7; Ge 19:24 – 25) but also Gentile sin at its worst; yet the words "LORD" and "our God" have overtones of a covenantal relationship unknown to the cities of the plain (v.10). The prophet presses home his point. Rulers and people have a Sodom-like offensiveness to God, and their ostentatious religious observances only aggravate the situation.

These verses highlight many features of Israel's system of worship. Oswalt (in loc.) says, "The repetition of terms throughout the passage contributes to the general atmosphere. The reader (or listener) gets the impression of an endless round of activities all repeated continuously to no effect.The weariness of God becomes palpable." Verse 11 implies an abundance of sacrifices well beyond the divine requirements (cf. Mic 6:6 – 8). God was nauseated by such a surfeit (cf. Ps 50:12 – 13), and the words "to me" and "more than enough" suggest the same kind of blasphemous, pagan idea of a god who needs to be fed with sacrifices as Psalm 50 rejects with biting irony. The burnt offering, in which the whole animal was given to God, was particularly inappropriate if the worship was halfhearted or insincere.

The temple courts (v.12) felt the heavy tread of the worshiping throng, probably swollen at such times of national crisis, but “trampling” also suggests desecration. This puts the question, “Who has asked this of you?” in its true perspective. God rejected “offerings” rendered “meaningless” by hypocrisy (v.13; cf. Jer 7:21 – 26; Hos 6:6; Am 5:21 – 27; Mic 6:6 – 8). The NIV’s “your evil assemblies” obscures the studied harshness of the word combination “iniquity” and “the solemn assembly” (NASB).The people have been shown as burdened with guilt (v.4); but here God in his turn has *become* (for he had not always been) burdened with their sacrifices.

The older critical view that Isaiah and other prophets rejected sacrifice as such has been abandoned by many scholars, although certainly not by all (see Blenkinsopp for a recent exposition of this view and Sweeney for the contrary position).It is ritual divorced from penitence that God hates.As Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out, in v.12 God describes the place where sacrifice was offered as “my courts,” which is difficult to understand if sacrificial worship, no matter how sincerely offered, was totally unacceptable. Also, on this older critical view, for consistency of interpretation v.15 must be regarded as a rejection of prayer as such! As it is, this verse — with its references to posture and frequency in prayer — presents the same emphasis on empty externalism that we see elsewhere in the passage.Here, too, we may discern a spiritual link between OT ritualism and Pharisaism as presented in the Gospels (cf. esp. Mt 6:5). Young (in loc.) comments:

> The nation .. . had become guilty of idolatry, seeking to worship him as though approaching an idol.He would therefore be to Judah as an idol. The idol could not open its eyes, so he would not open his eyes. The idol could not hear, so he would not hear the multiplied prayer. People who thus sin deserve only an idol. But there was a difference.In reality God was not acting as an idol. He closed his eyes and ears, it is true, but in so doing rejected the worship and prepared to bring judgment upon the worshiper.

16 – 17 God’s true way is announced and the moral note sounded, the need for urgent attention to it given emphasis by the staccato style the prophet adopts here. In view of the alleged Pelagianism of the prophets (viz., that human beings are capable of self-reformation), we should note that v.4 attributes to God the real power to wash away sins (implied too in the promise of v.18), but the prophets insisted on human responsibility. People are accountable, but the grace and power of fulfillment are God’s alone. The prophet’s words imply that the reclaimed sinner needs a course of instruction in the ways of God (v.17). This

teaching process begins in the call for social justice and defense of the fatherless. Isaiah thoroughly represents eighth-century prophecy (cf.Hos 4:2; Am 2:6 – 8; Mic 6:9 – 12). His rapid-fire style in these two verses underscores the authority and urgency of God's commands to his people.

18 – 20 The famous call of v.18 has been taken in more than one way by scholars. Many see the words as an offer of total forgiveness, for which vv.19 – 20 supply the divine conditions. Others understand the language to be ironic and render the second part of the verse as "If your sins are as scarlet, shall they be white as snow? If they are red like crimson, shall they be as wool?" There is still — even on this construction — an element of conditional promise in the passage (v.19), but the general tone becomes distinctly sterner. In fact, the language permits either possibility, though most recent scholars are inclined to the former.

Verses 19 – 20 summarize the Deuteronomic theology of divine blessing — found in passages such as Deuteronomy 28, which underlies much prophetic teaching. They contain a striking play on words. In effect God was saying, "Eat . . . or be eaten!"

21 – 23 Gitay, 36, sees this as the start of the second address in the book, which he identifies as extending from 1:21 to 2:5 and as focusing more specifically on the rulers, even though they are referred to also in v.10 within the first address. This is not certain but it is possible, for the rhythm of Isaiah's poetry changes suddenly as he introduces the characteristic "limp" of a Hebrew lament, opening with the exclamation "how!" (v.21; cf. 14:4; 1Sa 1:19; Ps 137:4; La 1:1; 2:1; 4:1; Hos 11:8). Even though there is no explicit threat of judgment until v.24, the sensitive listener hears the drumbeats of doom in the sound of the poetic measure.

Did Isaiah view the past through rose-tinted spectacles? Not necessarily, for words such as "justice"and "rulers" (cf. also v.26) show he was thinking primarily of the people's leaders; so the past he had in mind was perhaps the time of David, when Jerusalem first came under Israelite control. If this is so, it seems fitting that later in the book promises of future restoration should be associated with a Scion of the house of David.This seems more probable than the suggestion of Seitz (in loc.), who assumes that this chapter reflects the situation after rather than in 701 BC and that the reference is to the faith of Hezekiah

when the city was under Assyrian threat.

“Silver” and “choice wine” (v.22) are probable metaphors for the rulers (cf. Jer 6:28, 30; Eze 22:18 – 22), who have become utterly decadent.Far from challenging the people’s rebelliousness, indicated in v.2 (cf. v.20), they appear to have led it. Cheyne’s translation — “your rulers are unruly”(40) — preserves the play on words used also by Isaiah’s older contemporary in the northern kingdom; for “their leaders are rebellious” (Hos 9:15) is identical with this in the Hebrew except for the difference between second person and third. Hosea may also be the source of the figure of a harlot for the unfaithful people of God (Hos 1:2 et al.).

24 – 26 First was the ominous rhythm of the dirge (see comment on v.21), then a vivid description of moral corruption (v.23), and now a terrifying catena of majestic divine titles (v.24).The first of them — “Lord” (“master”) — is used of God by Isaiah more than any other OT writer. In its absolute form, as here, it always introduces a note of judgment (cf. 3:1; 10:16, 33; et al.). The second —“the LORD Almighty”— often linked with it, indicates supreme power (see comment on v.9), while the third —“the Mighty One of Israel” — is a somewhat uncommon term suggestive of bulllike strength (Ge 49:24; Isa 49:26; 60:16). Still there was no respite.To complete the verbal buildup, God’s message is prefixed by the agitated exclamation “Ah” (cf. v.4).

The burden God bears (cf. v.14) as the result of the meaningless offerings of his “foes” (such a change of language from “my people” in v.3!)demands relief in judgment. His hand (v.25), so often stretched out against Israel’s enemies (Ex 3:20; 15:6;Ps 118:15 – 16), has turned against his own people (cf. Zec 13:7). His threat of vengeance has taken an unexpected turn, however, for it issues in cleansing rather than destruction. Although so sinful, they were still his people, and his judgments were directed to the removal of their impurities.Verse 25 takes up imagery from v.22, while in v.26 the tone changes further still as God gives a wonderful promise of restoration and renewal. The reader should feel the dramatic quality and the emotional and spiritual power of these three great verses.

27 – 31 The theme of restoration continues for another verse, its literary setting anticipating the great vision of ch. 2, until the threatening tone returns

(1:28). Is Zion's redemption here physical or moral, and does the NIV's "penitent ones" rightly interpret the Hebrew word *šābîm*, which simply means "those who return"? The second question at least should almost certainly be answered in the affirmative, as the contrasting language of v.28 suggests. Redemption terminology is normally used in the OT with a physical connotation and is often so applied to Jerusalem/Zion in other parts of this book (e.g., 35:9 – 10; 51:10 – 11; 52:9; 59:20), although we should not drive too firm a wedge between the physical and the spiritual.

Sacred trees played an important part in the Canaanite fertility cult (cf. Dt 12:2 – 3; 2Ki 16:4;Hos 4:13), for deciduous trees such as the oak or terebinth may well have symbolized the death and rebirth of the god. The "gardens" (v.29) may be groves of such trees or else (especially in the light of v.30) places of sacred springs or wells. Darr, 94, distinguishes and itemizes the various ways in which literal and figurative references to plants function in Isaiah. Verses 29 – 30 teach the lesson that a people under judgment may be instructed from the very symbols of their apostasy as to the folly of such departure from the true God, while v.31 imparts the even more important lesson that destruction may come on them from the very thing their sin has brought into being. "Amazed" and "disgraced"(v.29) suggest that they recognize their values to be all wrong. "Mighty man" (v.31) may well be ironic, and we might compare "renew their strength" in 41:1 (see comment there).

NOTES

5 עַל מֶה (*ʿal meh*), rendered "Why?" in most ancient versions (also NIV, RSV, ASV), could mean "On what [part]?" or "Where?" (NASB). Most commentators reject the Vulgate/NEB reading,"Where can you still be struck if you will be disloyal still?" for it "destroys the parallelism" (Gray, in loc.); and the former rendering fits the context perfectly, for the chapter contains so much appeal to reason.

7 The NEB margin, following the view of many modern scholars, suggests that סְדֹם (*sᵉdōm*,' "Sodom")should be read here instead of זָרִים (*zārîm*, "strangers"). Certainly מַהְפֵּכָה (*mahpēkâ*,' "overthrown") is used elsewhere only in reference to the destruction of the cities of the plain (cf. 13:19; Dt 29:23[22]; Jer 49:18;50:40;Am 4:11), and a scribe could have wrongly transcribed *zārîm*(NIV, "foreigners") from earlier in the verse. Most modern English versions do not

even give this a place in the margin, and Clements (in loc.)is both difficult to understand and much too dogmatic when he says that the reading in the text "must be regarded as an editor's gloss based upon verse 9." Wildberger (in loc.) takes the same view as Clements, but the MT reading is perfectly natural. Indeed, a reference to Sodom at this point lessens the dramatic impact of the name, which comes with much greater force in vv.9 – 10.

8 בַּת־צִיּוֹן (*bat-ṣiyyôn,* "daughter of Zion") personifies the city of Jerusalem. It suggests that the hill gave birth to the city, though the concept of geography as the mother of society and so of history seems too sophisticated an explanation of a popular designation.

9 This is no reference to the great doctrine of the remnant (see Introduction). Isaiah avoids his usual remnant terminology and uses instead the noun שָׂרִיד (*śārîd,* "survivors").

10 תּוֹרַת (*tôrat,* "law") has been understood by some commentators as a reference to the Mosaic law.Calvin (in loc.) says, "He purposely employed the term *law* , in order to glance at their absurd opinion;because, by imagining that the offering of sacrifices, unaccompanied by faith and repentance, can appease God, they put an absurd interpretation on the *law*. By these words he reminded them that, by quoting Moses to them, he introduces nothing new and makes no addition to the *law*; that it is only necessary for them to *hear* what the will of God is; and on this subject he will faithfully instruct them" (emphasis his).This in fact approaches the other alternative, that is, that the prophet is referring to the word of God through himself. If he believed himself to be applying the Law itself, the two interpretations merge. For possible links with the OT wisdom tradition, see Jensen, 68ff.

13 קְטֹרֶת (*qṭōret,* "incense") is ambiguous, for it was used of both the smoke of sacrifice and incense proper (cf. Gray, in loc.). The question does not, however, affect the general sense of the passage.

17 The marginal rendering ("rebuke the oppressor") is possible linguistically (with a change from the MT's pointing) and strengthens the tone of the passage still more (cf. Gray and Wildberger, both in loc.).Motyer (1999, in loc.), however, says, "The change is however as unnecessary as it is minimal. 'Put

right the oppressor' (lit.) deals with the cause of social breakdown, the wrongdoer, not just the consequence (the person hurt). This is what Isaiah sought."

21 The repeated use of צֶדֶק "righteousness"; GK 7406) in vv.21, 26 – 27 in relation to Jerusalem is interesting (cf. Heb 7:1 – 2). Clements (in loc.) says, "An ancient and strongly felt association appears to have existed between Jerusalem and the concept of *righteousness*. This very probably arose through the use of the word as a divine title" (emphasis his).

26 The juxtaposition of "judges" with "counselors" in consecutive lines suggests a positive attitude toward the institution despite the oracle of judgment against them in 29:13 – 16. See Whedbee, 139 – 41, and also the note at 9:6.

31 חֲסָסֹן (*ḥăsāsōn*, "the mighty man") occurs only here and in Amos 2:9, and in both cases it is connected with trees. The KJV's rendering of פָּעֳלוֹ (*pŏʿŏlô*, "his work") as "the maker of it" is just possible and would require "the mighty man" to refer to the idol. The NIV follows the LXX, which seems to be the more natural rendering.

B. The Exaltation of God's House and the Extension of His Dominion (2:1 – 5)

OVERVIEW

Scholars interested in the literary structure of Isaiah point out that chs. 2 – 4 form a literary inclusio, with the opening and closing sections focusing on God's plan for Jerusalem while in between its lamentable present state is in view (see Motyer, 1993, in loc.).

1 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

2 In the last days
the mountain of the LORD 's temple will be established
as chief among the mountains;
it will be raised above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

3 Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD ,
to the house of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

5 Come, O house of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the LORD.

COMMENTARY

1 This heading virtually repeats the one at the start of the book, except for the reference there to the kings. It is not easy to fix the terminus of the material covered by it, but it certainly must have been intended to include chs. 2 – 4.

Most of the larger commentaries give the issue a full airing. Isaiah literally *saw* "the word" (*haddābār*; cf. KJV, NASB, et al.), which suggests that the revelation contained both visionary and verbal elements. In view of the fact that many scholars have thought of Isaiah of Jerusalem as simply a preacher of judgment, it is refreshing to find Seitz, 23, asserting that this superscription "insists that Isaiah's message was one of ultimate salvation and the worship of the nations (2:1 – 5) as well as one essentially of judgment and exhortation (1:31)."

2 – 4 This glorious vision (Watts, in loc., calls it "a little gem") is found, with small variations, in Micah 4:1 – 3, which, unlike here, concludes with a view of every man sitting in peace under his fruit trees (Mic 4:4). Joel 3:10 contains language clearly parallel with Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3, but the date of Joel is disputed. If it is early, part of the oracle could have been given first to him, but this is most uncertain. Was the oracle original to Isaiah, to Micah, or to some earlier prophet used by them both? We cannot be sure. Hayes and Irvine (in loc.) think it probable that it was originally part of a Zion psalm. Some who deny unity of authorship both to the book of Isaiah and to Micah date the oracle as later than both prophets (e.g., M. A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1 – 4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition* [New York: de Gruyter, 1988], 164 – 74).

If we accept supernatural inspiration, then we cannot exclude the possibility of independent revelation in the case of each prophet. We should note that apart from Micah 4:4, the statement "for the mouth of the LORD has spoken" is found only in the book of Isaiah (1:20; 40:5; 58:14). If the book comes from one author, this reinforces the majority scholarly opinion that Isaiah was the more likely prophet to have received the oracle. Could it be that Micah began his prophetic ministry within the circle of Isaiah's disciples (cf. 8:16) and so became acquainted with the phrase, or even the whole prophecy, in that way? This is certainly possible.

"In the last days" (v.2) is a technical eschatological expression, so its introduction here relates the vision to the period when God's purposes will find fulfillment. The NT, making explicit the fact that the Messiah comes twice, applies the phrase both to the period of his first advent (e.g., Ac 2:17; Heb 1:2) and to his second (e.g., Jas 5:3; cf. 1Pe 1:5).Seitz (in loc.) argues that interpretation here must combine an historical and an eschatological understanding of the passage. The context of the oracle in Micah suggests that

the first stage of its fulfillment took place in the return from Babylonia (Mic 4:1 – 10), when ruined Jerusalem (Mic 3:12) would be rebuilt and her temple raised again.

"Temple" (v.2) and "house" (v.3) represent the same Hebrew word (*bêt*). The NIV translates in the same way in Micah; thus the motive for the variation within this oracle appears to be stylistic.

Chapter 2 uses the language of elevation and abasement extensively to convey dignity and pride on the one hand and lowliness and humiliation on the other. Is this uniformly figurative, or are we to take it literally in this small section? There is clearly a figurative element here, picturing nations as streams (cf. Jer 51:44) — flowing upward! Widy-apranawa (in loc.) sees this flow as reversing the scattering of the nations at Babel (Ge 11:8). Even if Mount Zion's promised elevation can be taken literally (the thought occurs elsewhere, viz., Eze 40:2; Zec 14:10; cf. Ps 68:15 – 18), its purpose, of course, is to underline its spiritual preeminence as the source of divine teaching for the nations. Both within Israel (at the pagan and paganizing "high places") and farther afield (e.g., at Mount Olympus in Greece) gods and their worship were associated with mountaintops, so that the supreme elevation of Mount Zion symbolizes the ultimate triumph of the true worship of Yahweh.

There is no reference to the messianic king in this passage, but the word "established" reminds us of Psalm 2:6 ("I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill"). Both the hill and the king are secure because they are in the center of God's purpose for his people. In Isaiah 1:7 foreigners in Jerusalem's environs greedily strip the fields of their crops. How different the picture here! They now come not for plunder but in peace, not to rob but to learn. The analogy of streams is particularly apt because the major traditional oppressors of Israel were associated with great rivers — the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates (cf. 8:6 – 8).

In Isaiah's day "the house of the God of Jacob"was at Jerusalem, not at the original Bethel (*bêt-ʾēl*, "house of God" [Ge 28:16 – 22]), for Bethel was now the site of an apostate shrine (1Ki 12:28 – 29).The phrase "God of Jacob" underlines the special relationship of the true God with historical Israel, perhaps including the schismatic northern tribes, while "Zion"/"Jerusalem" represents divinely

ordained worship and divinely authorized government. So this passage weds normal OT particularism with the vision of universal worship and peace, which in different forms recurs often in Isaiah.

In 1:10 the word of God was addressed to rebellious Israelites. Here it is eagerly sought by nations formerly pagan — not for mere information, but for practical obedience. As in 1:10 (see Note), "the law" is paralleled by "the word of the LORD."

The issues that set nations against one another do not disappear automatically but are settled by the supreme Judge, whose decisions are accepted.Thus there is no uneasy calm but peace based on righteousness (cf. 11:1 – 9; Ps 72). In the abolition of every cause of conflict, war itself disappears; and peace, with its economic consequences (cf. v.4 with passages such as 35:1 – 2), takes its place. The words "swords" and "plowshares" occur in reverse order in Joel 3:10. Clements (in loc.) may be correct in suggesting that both prophets are alluding to a common proverb.

5 Isaiah frequently accuses God's people of not walking in his ways (42:2 – 4; 58:2; 63:17), although English translations do not always translate the verb "walk" literally. Micah 4:5 contemplates the idolatry of the nations and expresses, on the part of his people, Judah's determination (probably superficial as far as they are concerned) to walk in the ways of the Lord. Isaiah views the future obedience of the nations to the true God as a challenge to the house of Jacob to walk in his ways. The nations are not yet coming to Jerusalem to be taught by the Lord, but Israel already has his word. How unthinkable then that she should continue to walk in darkness! The Chris tian is faced by the same kind of challenge in Ephesians 5:8 – 20. Motyer (1999, in loc.) says that the poem is rooted in the universalism of God's promise to Abraham (Ge 12:2 – 3; 22:16 – 18) but that here Isaiah brings out of it a challenge to his contemporaries.

NOTE

2 – 4 Some (e.g., Clements, in loc.) consider the theology of this passage too advanced for an eighth-century prophet. Herbert (in loc.) reckons the arguments

for treating it as postexilic to be inconclusive, and Gitay, 39, trenchantly criticizes them. O. Kaiser (in loc.) thinks it improbable that it is by Isaiah but nevertheless regards it as preexilic. The arguments for authenticity are presented in detail by H. Wildberger (in loc.), who concludes that “no adequate objections can be marshalled against this passage coming from Isaiah.” Jensen, 86, declares, “Whether or not one finds Isaiah 2:2 – 4 isolated from the rest of the teaching of Isaiah may depend on how one judges the authenticity of passages like 9:1 – 6 and 11:1 – 9; for those who accept these oracles as Isaiah’s, 2:2 – 4 presents a picture of future blessedness that is not without analogy in the prophet’s thought.”

C. The Day of the Lord (2:6 – 22)

OVERVIEW

Hayes and Irvine, influenced no doubt by their identification of ch. 1 as coming from the time of the earthquake in the days of Uzziah (see Overview to ch. 1), treat this passage as dealing with this past event rather than a future day of divine judgment. This involves, of course, a radically different translation,with verbs in the future tense being taken as past tenses. Because of special features in the Hebrew language, this is in fact possible. It assumes the correctness of the view of these authors that the oracles in Isaiah 1 – 39 are arranged in generally chronological order, and this is very much open to question.

6 You have abandoned your people,
the house of Jacob.
They are full of superstitions from the East;
they practice divination like the Philistines
and clasp hands with pagans.

7 Their land is full of silver and gold;
there is no end to their treasures.
Their land is full of horses;
there is no end to their chariots.

8 Their land is full of idols;
they bow down to the work of their hands,
to what their fingers have made.

9 So man will be brought low
and mankind humbled —
do not forgive them.

10 Go into the rocks,
hide in the ground
from dread of the LORD
and the splendor of his majesty!

11 The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled
and the pride of men brought low;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day.

12 The LORD Almighty has a day in store
for all the proud and lofty,
for all that is exalted

(and they will be humbled),
13 for all the cedars of Lebanon, tall and lofty,
and all the oaks of Bashan,
14 for all the towering mountains
and all the high hills,
15 for every lofty tower
and every fortified wall,
16 for every trading ship
and every stately vessel.
17 The arrogance of man will be brought low
and the pride of men humbled;
the LORD alone will be exalted in that day,
18 and the idols will totally disappear.
19 Men will flee to caves in the rocks
and to holes in the ground
from dread of the LORD
and the splendor of his majesty,
when he rises to shake the earth.
20 In that day men will throw away
to the rodents and bats
their idols of silver and idols of gold,
which they made to worship.
21 They will flee to caverns in the rocks
and to the overhanging crags
from dread of the LORD
and the splendor of his majesty,
when he rises to shake the earth.
22 Stop trusting in man,
who has but a breath in his nostrils.
Of what account is he?

COMMENTARY

6 – 9 Motyer (1993, in loc.) says that this section is as rhythmic as anything Isaiah ever wrote and points out how many contrasts there are between it and vv.1 – 4. I am indebted to Ralph Alexander for pointing out the many links of terminology and idea with Micah 5:10 – 14, including the exact wording “they bow down to the works of their hands.” Here then is a further oracular link between the two prophets (see comment on 2:2 – 4). The sore trials the people are to pass through will give evidence that God has abandoned them (v.6) to their enemies (not absolutely, or forever, as 4:2 – 6 will show), and this itself is an

earnest of the great day of judgment on them.

The causes of this judgment remind us of the divinely given constitution for the kingdom laid down in Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20, set in a context (Dt 16:18 – 18:22) that refers not only to the leadership of the people (which becomes an explicit theme in Isa 3), but also to the need for separation from the abominable practices of the nations. The kings of Judah may have been native born, but this did not prevent the people from being contaminated by foreign religious and semireligious practices.

To "clasp hands" probably symbolizes and seals a bargain. The people were seeking economic and military self-sufficiency (v.7) so that they need not depend on their God; yet at the same time they were groveling to man-made objects of worship (v.8).Possibly the language here is deliberately evocative of the conditions in Solomon's day (1Ki 10:11; cf.Dt 17:14 – 20) to remind the people of the judgment that fell on the land after his death. The principles of God's dealings with them had not changed over the intervening years! Incidentally, this use of evocative language tells somewhat against the view of Gitay, 51, that vv.7 – 8 relate to the foreigners of v.6 and not to Judah at all. Widyapratanawa (in loc.), commenting on the reference in v.8 to idols, points out that Isaiah calls them ,אלילים "wee gods,"in contrast with ,אלהים Israel's God.

10 – 11 These verses, plus v.12, remind us of the terrifying words of 1:24. The people had been abasing themselves, but in the presence of dumb idols and not the true and only God. Their action was appropriate, but their object of worship was wrong. Even today in the East, physical abasement is a sign of at least formal respect. Here (v.10) it is terror that motivates this lowliness. The proud are eager to avoid the gaze of God, for his majestic presence drives every rival underground in the frantic and, of course, utterly unavailing search for cover. This picture of the people enjoying the affluence of the land but turning aside to idols until the Lord, by an act of judgment, establishes his sole right to worship is yet another reminder of Deuteronomy (cf. Dt 6:10 – 15). It is noteworthy, too, that the prophet's call comes in the context of an awesome sight of God in his majesty (Isa 6).

12 – 18 When God acts in judgment, it is often to upset human values so that everything can be seen from the divine perspective. Jerusalem's hill is to be

exalted above other and greater mountains (v.2), but all that is reckoned great by human beings will be brought low (v.12), for Isaiah's God hates pride.J. Barton, 49, noticing that pride is a unifying theme in Isaiah's view of sin, quotes Luther's saying, "All sin is pride." Another important passage in this prophecy where verbs of exaltation are used is 52:13, but there the exaltation is God's own act to vindicate his humble suffering Servant, which makes it more akin to the exaltation portrayed in vv.2 – 4 than in the present verses.

The prophet here introduces symbols of pride to engage the imagination. Some commentators (e.g., Clements, Kaiser) see this passage as depicting a judgment that will sweep over the country from the mountains of Lebanon (v.13) in the north to the ships (v.16) in port at Ezion-Geber on the Gulf of Aqaba.This was certainly the direction from which Israel's enemies normally came into the country.

Nevertheless, much of the imagery of this passage can be viewed as Phoenician. It was in the hinterland of Tyre and Sidon that the cedars grew (v.13); it was there, too, that the highest mountains (v.14) were found and the grand designs of stone masons (v.15) and shipwrights (v.16) were to be seen in its ports. "Every trading ship" is a free translation of "ships of Tarshish" (NIV mg.; cf. Eze 27:25), and these were based in Phoenicia.This land was notorious as a malign religious influence (v.18), not only on Israel but also on Judah; for Jezebel's family became part of the dynastic stock of both kingdoms for a while (cf. 2Ki 8:16 – 11:21). It was from this quarter that religious syncretism had come during the previous century, and its features could still stand for alien religion. The main point, of course, is that God's act of judgment will humble every manifestation of human pride.

The repetition of the words "from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth" (vv.19, 21; cf. v.10) is awesome indeed and is reminiscent of the repetition employed by Amos in oracles of judgment (cf. Am 1:3, 6; 4:6, 8; et al.).

19 – 21 The terrifying revelation of the glory, power, and judgment of the one true God will give human beings — but too late — a proper sense of values (v.19). The silver and gold used to make idols (cf. 2:7 – 8) are at last recognized as worthless in the light of his glory (v.20). The reference to manmade idols

reminds the reader of the deep irony of passages such as 44:9 – 20 and 46:1 – 7. Oswalt (in loc.) comments on the effect of the juxtaposition of the supposed preciousness of the idols with the squeamishness felt toward the small, unclean rodents and then says, “Mighty gods? Hardly.”

22 After the idols have been cut down to size by the revelation of the true God in his judicial majesty, the spotlight of the divine contempt focuses on human beings, through whom the religious infection had taken root (v.6). Their dignity as creatures made in God’s image had been cast away by their groveling before idols made by their own hands (vv.8 – 9, 20), and their arrogant pride would be abased before God’s disclosure (vv.11, 17 – 21).Perhaps the reference to breath not only suggests frailty but also intentionally alludes to Genesis 2:7.So, implies the prophet, you are worshiping gods you have made instead of the God who made you!

Miscall, 27, says, “To this point in Isaiah a considerable portion of what will be treated in the rest of the book has been introduced. The plot elements of divine goodness, human sin, judgment and salvation are here.”

NOTES

6 The NIV renders part of this verse, “They are full of superstitions from the East; they practice divination like the Philistines,” and the NASB, “They are filled *with influences* from the east, and *they are* soothsayers like the Philistines.” The Hebrew of the first of these two clauses reads literally, “for they are full from the east.” Since the days of Lowth, the father of the modern study of Hebrew poetry, most versions and commentators have treated the two clauses as expressing parallel ideas. The NEB, however, adopts an emendation and translates, “for they are crowded with traders and barbarians like the Philistines,” therefore understanding the whole verse in commercial rather than magical terms. See the brief note in Herbert and the longer technical discussions in Gray and Wildberger.

9 “Do not forgive them” may be understood as a word from the prophet to God, seeking perhaps a divine vindication of his message (so most commentators) or, less probably, as God’s word to Isaiah forbidding him to grant

them absolution in the name of the Lord. Widyapranawa (in loc.), pointing out that it has no parallel in vv.11 and 17 and so seems out of place, goes on to say, "Could it be merely a nasty remark by a 'pious' scribe in later centuries?" But must a short sequence of refrains be identical, and does this strange suggestion of a scribal gloss really carry conviction in the light of 6:9 – 10? The NIV margin gives the alternative translation "not raise them up," which would fit the context well but is a less natural rendering of the Hebrew. IQIsaa omits the words altogether.

11 The phrase "in that day" (vv.11, 17, 20) is an OT technical term for the day of the Lord. Isaiah's use of it may reflect his awareness of the message of his older contemporary in the north (Am 5:18 – 20), who declared that this day of God's judgment would not fall simply on Israel's enemies but also on herself.

12 The NIV follows the MT as its stands. The RSV, NEB, and many commentators prefer the LXX, reading the second half of the verse as "against all that is lifted up and high" (RSV). Either could be supported from the context.

16 "Every trading ship" is literally "every ship of Tarshish" (NIV mg.). Tarshish was a Phoenician colony in the western Mediterranean, and the ships named for it were seagoing vessels, though W. F. Albright ("New Light on the Early History of the Phoenician Colonization," *BASOR* 83 [October 1941]: 21 – 22) has argued that they were essentially ore-carrying vessels.

20 The NIV "rodents" becomes "moles" in the NASB, but the NEB has "dungbeetles." Herbert (in loc.) says, "The Hebrew word must mean a digging creature, but moles do not inhabit rocky places. This beetle gathers animal droppings as food, rolls the dung into a ball, and carries it into a crevice. Known as the scarab, it was venerated in Egypt."

22 This verse is absent from the LXX and so considered a late addition by many commentators. Oswalt (in loc.), however, says that "its fitness for this context is striking . . . . In a biting and abrupt way . . . it sums up the import of all that has been said."

D. God's Judgment on Jerusalem and Judah (3:1 – 4:1)

OVERVIEW

The solemn melody of divine judgment runs on into this passage, which has many links with ch. 2 and may have been part of the same oracle, for it is not always easy to tell where prophetic oracles begin and end.

Motyer (1999), writing on 2:5 – 21, points out its concentration on the religious situation and the failure of the false gods, while 3:1 – 4:1 shows ordered society collapsing because of moral failure. In this respect this sequence is not unlike the book of Judges, where chs. 17 – 21 show the deep spiritual and moral failure lying beneath so much of what occurred in chs. 1 – 16.

The generalized but extremely powerful threats of judgment against everything that would challenge the supreme eminence (cf.6:1) of Israel's God temporarily put out of sight the actual forms this sinful arrogance took at the time of Isaiah's prophecy (cf. 2:6 – 9), but this chapter focuses attention on the contemporary situation. The judgment will, of course, fall on the city and nation, but special attention is directed toward the leaders and the aristocratic women.

1 See now, the Lord,
the LORD Almighty,
is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah
both supply and support:
all supplies of food and all supplies of water,
2 the hero and warrior,
the judge and prophet,
the soothsayer and elder,
3 the captain of fifty and man of rank,
the counselor, skilled craftsman and clever enchanter.
4 I will make boys their officials;
mere children will govern them.
5 People will oppress each other —
man against man, neighbor against neighbor.
The young will rise up against the old,
the base against the honorable.

6 A man will seize one of his brothers
at his father’s home, and say,
“You have a cloak, you be our leader;
take charge of this heap of ruins!”
7 But in that day he will cry out, “
I have no remedy.
I have no food or clothing in my house;
do not make me the leader of the people.”
8 Jerusalem staggers,
Judah is falling;
their words and deeds are against the LORD,
defying his glorious presence.
9 The look on their faces testifies against them;
they parade their sin like Sodom;
they do not hide it.
Woe to them!
They have brought disaster upon themselves.
10 Tell the righteous it will be well with them,
for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds.
11 Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them!
They will be paid back for what their hands have done.
12 Youths oppress my people,
women rule over them.
O my people, your guides lead you astray;
they turn you from the path.
13 The LORD takes his place in court;
he rises to judge the people.
14 The LORD enters into judgment
against the elders and leaders of his people:
“It is you who have ruined my vineyard;
the plunder from the poor is in your houses.
15 What do you mean by crushing my people
and grinding the faces of the poor?”
declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.
16 The LORD says,
“The women of Zion are haughty,
walking along with outstretched necks,
flirting with their eyes,
tripping along with mincing steps,
with ornaments jingling on their ankles.
17 Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion;
the LORD will make their scalps bald.”
18 In that day the Lord will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, 19 the earrings and bracelets and veils, 20 the headdresses and ankle chains and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, 21 the signet rings and nose rings, 22 the fine robes and the capes

and cloaks, the purses 23 and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls.
24 Instead of fragrance there will be a stench;
instead of a sash, a rope;
instead of well-dressed hair, baldness;
instead of fine clothing, sackcloth;
instead of beauty, branding.
25 Your men will fall by the sword,
your warriors in battle.
26 The gates of Zion will lament and mourn;
destitute, she will sit on the ground.
4:1 In that day seven women
will take hold of one man
and say, "We will eat our own food
and provide our own clothes;
only let us be called by your name.
Take away our disgrace!"

COMMENTARY

1 – 7 The divine titles in v.1, with their stress on power, lead the reader — and no doubt the original hearer — to anticipate a strong threat of judgment (cf. 1:24). This comes first of all in summary form (v.1), and then it is spelled out in more detail.

Most translations try to preserve the alliteration in the Hebrew words that the NIV renders "supply and support" (v.1). Calvin's "*vigorem et vim* " makes the English reader think of "vim and vigor," but, of course, the phrase is expressive of power directed toward the support of human society. As Calvin (in loc.) says, the clause that the words are found in means that "God will take away every help and assistance by which you think that you are upheld, so that nothing whatever may be left to support you."

The reference to famine is brief but ominous (cf. v.7); the prophet concentrates on the removal of responsible and trusted leadership. The application of "supply and support" to these people suggested to Mauchline (in loc.) a parallel with our expression "the pillars of the church." Isaiah brings together many different types of leader (vv.2 – 7) — the military and the civil, the charismatic and the official, the small and the great, and, moreover, the legitimate and the illegitimate. This final element in particular provides a parallel

to a somewhat similar passage in Isaiah's older contemporary in the north, Hosea (see Hos 3:4).

The people were showing too great a tendency to put their trust in human beings (Isa 2:22).The prophet warns them that the objects of their trust are to be removed. Those traditionally respected — "the old," "the honorable," (v.5) — will be violently replaced by the manifestly inadequate and by the base oppressor.

The situation will in fact reach such a pitch that the mere possession of some outward semblance of wealth or rank will attract the attention of those desperately seeking someone to bring a measure of order to a situation of chaos.The phrase "this heap of ruins" (v.6) anticipates the later picture of a destitute and defeated city (v.26). O. Kaiser (in loc.) makes a most telling comment: "It is astonishing how realistically the prophet is here able to describe the consequences of a total collapse of the state. Anyone who remembers the months that followed May 1945 in Germany will have the sensation in reading this passage of being carried right back to those days."

8 – 12 The prophet reminds his readers of the spiritual and moral causes of this anarchy. Judah and its capital city will reach the brink of total collapse, with disaster to follow, because of insolent and blatant rebellion against the Lord. "His glorious presence" (v.8) is another reminder of ch. 2, especially of v.10. It is true that this may come from an earlier period of Isaiah's ministry than the prophecies in ch. 1, but it seems that all this pride and defiant independence of God and his will are going hand in hand with scrupulous religiosity. In fact, vv.10 – 11 have points in common with the appeal of 1:19 – 20, including some verbal links.

Some writers note not only the way this passage reflects the Deuteronomic principle of retribution — which is, of course, extremely common in the prophets — but also some links with the wisdom tradition.Whedbee, 89, mentions commentators who consider vv.10 – 11 a late addition to the book of Isaiah from someone schooled in wisdom teaching. But we may recognize a link with the wisdom tradition without drawing any such conclusion, for Solomon was two centuries dead when the prophet wrote these words. It is the generalizing tone of the passage that reflects this tradition.Perhaps this, along

with the reference to Sodom (v.9), will stimulate the original hearer to ponder the fate of Sodom and how Abraham prayed for the “righteous” in it (Ge 18 – 19). Perhaps there is an implicit doctrine of the remnant here (see Introduction, p. 450).

Verse 12 takes up the theme of vv.4 – 5. By his use of the phrase “my people,” Isaiah reminds them of the covenantal relationship. Psalm 1, a great wisdom psalm, warns us against walking in the counsel of the wicked (Ps 1:1). This counsel is especially influential and dangerous when it comes from national leadership.

13 – 15 There are many different points of connection between various parts of Isaiah 1 – 6. The lawcourt scene (v.13) reminds us of ch. 1, while the reference to the vineyard (v.14) anticipates ch. 5.

This brings out the thematic unity of these chapters. The repeated Hebrew word <*am* m (“people”;vv.12 – 15) links these three verses to the end of the previous section.

Many biblical passages show the responsibility of leadership among God’s people and the exacting nature of his judgment on his people’s shepherds (e.g., Jer 23; 25; Eze 34; Zec 10 – 11; Jn 10; Jas 3:1).Not only may leaders take people aside from the right path (v.12); but also, as we have already seen (vv.5, 12), positions of privilege and responsibility may be used to foster self-interest rather than social good. This forms God’s major accusation in this dramatic judgment scene. As Motyer notes (1999, in loc.), “crushing” and “grinding” suggest that they have treated the people like a crop to be exploited for their own enrichment.

The great titles that close this section (v.15; cf.1:24; 3:1) are a fearsome reminder that God not only has the right to judge his people but also the power to carry his judgment into effect. There can be no possible escape from the consequences of wrongdoing.

3:16 – 4:1 If there is still some moral fiber in the women of a rapidly deteriorating society, the situation is not without hope; for it is the women who, through the home, have the most formative influence on the younger generation. The arrogant pride seen in Judah’s rulers is, however, just as evident in its

women. Those depicted here are clearly the wealthy, whose rich stores of finery have probably been bought by the plunder taken by their husbands from the poor (cf. v.14).

In v.9 the prophet linked their facial expressions with a Sodom-like parade of sin, perhaps suggesting that not all was right in the sexual life of the community. The passage moves swiftly from the ostentatious posturing of these women as they parade in the streets of Jerusalem (v.16) to the suggestion of far-from-seemly attempts to attract male attention (vv.18 – 24), although this is probably also implied in v.16 if, as Wildberger argues, the women are there coyly looking to see whether their elegance has been noticed. The judgment formula “in that day”(3:18; 4:1) provides a further link with ch. 2 and introduces a catalog of their adornments and other luxurious paraphernalia. This stands in stark contrast to the repeated phrase “the poor” in vv.14 – 15.

The NIV exhibits the transition from poetry to prose, and certainly here nothing seems more appropriate. The women themselves may have waxed eloquent, even poetical, about some of these items at times, but the prophet simply lists them.

The judgment will come through enemies who will take the Israelites captive, giving them the rough garb of prisoners of war (“a rope,” “sackcloth”; v.24). Removing locks of hair suggests the city will be taken by the Babylonians, for they often did this to those taken in war. The reference to “branding” (v.24) is also consistent with enslavement as a result of capture.

By a swift yet appropriate movement of thought, in vv.25 – 26 Isaiah turns away from the daughters of Zion (the literal meaning of the phrase “the women of Zion” in v.16) to the city herself, referred to in 1:8 as “the Daughter of Zion.” The word “your”in v.25 is singular. The city and her gates (v.26) are graphically personified; and for a moment (esp. in view of the probable allusions to Babylonian customs with prisoners of war), we can imagine we are reading Jeremiah (cf. Jer 14:2) or Lamentations (cf. La 1:1 – 4; 2:10). Isaiah boldly transports us from his confident predictions to their dire fulfillment.Some would transfer all such passages to the exilic or postexilic periods; but the fact remains that they have come down to us with the name of Isaiah prefixed to them, and attempts to remove them remain unconvincing.

Just as swiftly we return to Jerusalem's women (4:1). Perhaps those pictured here have been widowed (cf. 3:25) through the violent overthrow of the city. In any case the judgment on the city has drastically altered the normal male-female proportions in the population. These concerned women are prepared to forego the normal perquisites of marriage to secure its status or, at least, to gain the protection of a name. If we find this difficult to understand, it is largely because we live in a society that does not place as high a premium on marriage and childbearing. The interesting links with 3:7 suggest that the same judgment is in view, or at least one with the same kind of effects on the economy of the country. The leading man could not make proper provision for either subjects or wives. We may recognize both the snare of wealth and the economic consequences that sometimes follow national sin without hardening either into a hard-and-fast rule. God's judgments do not always follow the same pattern — though they always proceed from the same principles, for his nature is unchanging.

NOTES

3:1 Since Duhm, many scholars (e.g., Clements, O. Kaiser, Wildberger) have seen the references to food and water as an editorial gloss placed here to link the passage with a situation of siege and famine, probably at the fall of Jerusalem. Mauchline (in loc.), however, declares, "There are at least two reasons for accepting it as authentic: the first is that it would be difficult to account for its later intrusion into a passage which, without it, reads coherently and easily; and, secondly, verse 7 supports what is said here, that the land suffered from famine and dire want as well as from social commotions."

3 On "the counselor," see Notes at 1:26 and 9:6.

12 Clements (in loc.), among others, follows the LXX and Targum in reading "usurers" instead of "women" here. Mauchline (in loc.), however, thinks the concept of exactors ruling is unlikely and accepts the Hebrew as authentic: "The rule of the queen mother had been experienced in Judah (cf. 2Ki 11:1 – 16) and was not well-esteemed." Wildberger (in loc.), after discussing various possibilities, concludes that an assured solution is not possible.

13 The MT reads “peoples”; but the NIV, with most other English versions, follows the LXX because the plural does not make good sense in the context.

18 – 23 It is not easy to identify all the detailed items here. In fact, there is a difference of opinion among scholars as to the nature of some of them. See O. Kaiser and Wildberger (both in loc.) and also *IDB* (1:871) and *ZPEB* (2:164).

E. Zion's Glorious Future (4:2 – 6)

OVERVIEW

Chapters 2 – 4 exhibit beautiful balance. Brief but moving passages depict God's future purpose for Jerusalem and enclose a longer one describing the judgment and making its cause clear. The two pictures of the future hope can hardly be exchanged, for the second refers to the judgment and the need for it in particularly meaningful terms for those who have read the intervening passage.This is just one example of the exquisite order found in Isaiah.

> 2 In that day the Branch of the LORD will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be
> the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel. 3 Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem,
> will be called holy, all who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. 4 The Lord will wash away
> the filth of the women of Zion; he will cleanse the bloodstains from Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment
> and a spirit of fire. 5 Then the LORD will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who
> assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over all the glory will be
> a canopy. 6 It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding place from
> the storm and rain.

COMMENTARY

2 The great contrast between this section and the preceding one is accentuated by the fact that both vv.1 and 2 commence with the phrase "in that day."This section itself contains a note of judgment in v.4; but clearly the day of the Lord, though basically judgmental, introduces also the salvation that is the sequel and consequence of God's cleansing act.

This verse contains a major *crux interpretum* that introduces us not only to the question of how this passage relates to its context but also to the correct approach to the book's Christological teaching. The question concerns the phrases "the Branch of the LORD" and "the fruit of the land" (or "fruit of the earth," NASB). There are four main views.

1. Both phrases refer to the land's renewed fruitfulness. A majority of modern commentators (e.g., Duhm, Marti, Gray, Procksch, Kaiser, Wildberger, Clements) take this view. They take *semah* ("Branch") to mean "produce,"which is a proper translation. Calvin, rejecting the standard messianic interpretation of his day, comes close to this in seeing here a reference to "a rich supply both of spiritual and earthly blessings." It is often said that the two key phrases must be virtually identical in meaning, so that the botanical sense of the second determines also the meaning of the first, and this fits the general context, with its references to famine (3:1, 7) and devastation through war (3:25 – 26; cf. 1:7 – 9, 19 – 20).

But why "the Branch *of the* LORD?" This seems to imply some special emphasis on the relationship of the branch to God, difficult to account for if simply biological fruitfulness is in view. Why, too, are its appearance and glory underlined rather than its character as provision for human need? For the first objection, however, the reader should compare Numbers 24:6 and Psalm 104:16, where similar phrases occur; for the second, Isaiah's own emphasis on the beauty of the renewed land in passages such as Isaiah 35:1 – 2 and 60:13.

2. The second phrase is literal while the first refers to the remnant of Israel surviving God's judgment. So, for instance, Mauchline (in loc.) says that this remnant "will rise as a shoot or branch from the stump of the tree which has been stripped to the ground (cf. 6:13).. . . It . . .will be beautiful and glorious, because it is the righteous remnant and is of God: and the fruit of the land which will spring up in this new day will be their pride and glory."

But the remnant is present in the verse apart from these two phrases, and to see it here also seems quite unnatural. The "branch"and the "fruit" appear to be identical, for although it is in prose the oracle is dominated by identical parallelism and other comparable forms of repetitive phrasing. See 49:3, 6 for a similar difficulty in connection with the attempt to make a straightforward equation of Israel and the servant of God.

3. The second phrase is literal and the first messianic. Most modern conservative commentators take this view, pointing out that *semah*. ("branch") occurs in four verses (Jer 23:5;33:15; Zec 3:8; 6:12) as a technical messianic designation. But most readers would take it that the

two parts of the verse are parallel in their meaning.

4. Both phrases apply to the Messiah. This interpretation is ancient and pre-Chris tian in its origin, for the Targum renders “the Branch” as “the Messiah.” Alexander, Delitzsch, and Motyer are among modern commentators arguing for a messianic interpretation of the whole verse. Motyer (1993, in loc.) says, “to allow both phrases to apply to the Messiah gives the four impressive nouns the personal reference which alone seems to accord with their weight.”

It is a strange anomaly that many who hold to the first interpretation assign the passage to a postexilic date, which in fact brings it into a period when the messianic use of *semah* had become technical and standard. Young (in loc.), arguing for a messianic interpretation, thought its use by Isaiah stemmed from reflection on 2 Samuel 23:5, which has messianic overtones and where the cognate verb *semah*(“bring to fruition”) is used. Psalm 132:17 also uses the verb when it says, “Here I will make a horn grow for David.” Young argues too that the reference in Isaiah 3:12 – 15 to bad rulers would lead us to expect a good ruler in the prophet’s vision of the future. In the light of recent awareness of thematic motivation in the book’s arrangement, this argument finds additional strength from the proximity of the two passages. Many commentators generally sympathetic to the messianic interpretation find it difficult, however, to take the second of the phrases in the messianic sense, for nothing like it is so used elsewhere in the OT.

Perhaps there is another possible way of understanding the verse. In Scripture words and phrases often start life at a subtheological level but eventually become technical, theological terms, gathering theological connotations and nuances as time goes by.“Branch” is a good example of this (cf. “servant”in chs. 42 – 53). The concept of the branch (“concept” is the correct term, for various botanical words are used) begins in Isaiah at the botanical level, which is in view here. The famine and devastation wreaked on the land by their enemies have shown the Israelites their dire need of a literally fruitful land. The God of new life therefore promises that the future will be marked by such God-given fruitfulness. See the Introduction, pp. 455 – 58.

The people’s need of life, however, goes far deeper, embracing the nation’s very existence, which is being threatened by its foes. They need reassurance that the God of new life will make the remnant of his people fruitful too (cf.

comment at 6:13). But their deepest need is for the Messiah; thus he appears as the ultimate "Branch of the LORD " in ch. 11. The reader familiar with this development will see 4:2 in terms both of its meaning in its context and in terms of the deeper significance this language will have in the rest of Isaiah and beyond it. The phrase "the Branch of the LORD " becomes a suggestive harbinger of this deeper significance.Incidentally, this "branch" theme is later gathered up into both the royal (11:1) and the servant (53:2) themes, so that the prophetic picture of God's great purpose is both unified and enriched.

3 The holiness of Jerusalem is due to the Lord's action to be described in v.4. The recording of the names of Jerusalem's inhabitants may seem at first to be the listing of those still alive after the judgments have taken place (cf. 1:9), but the eschatological context suggests that eternal life is in view.

4 Both the women of Jerusalem (3:16 – 23) and her people generally (1:16 – 20) need cleansing, and the Lord has promised to do this.The focus on the women here by no means excludes the need of the men for cleansing, too, but is determined by the context in 3:16 – 4:1.

What does *rûah* (GK 8120) really convey here?Both the NIV and NASB render it "spirit," while the NIV margin has "the Spirit." It is variously rendered "breath," "wind," and "spirit" in the OT and is the regular word used for the Spirit of God. It is used in a context of judgment also in 30:28 (cf.40:7), where the NIV does not take it as a reference to the divine Spirit. Nevertheless, in ch. 11 *rûah* . is linked with the theme of judgment — though in a much milder context — in connection with the Messiah's ministry. Perhaps we should understand it as "a blast of judgment and a blast of fire" and see it as another example of a term destined for enrichment as the book proceeds (cf. comment at v.2 above).

5 – 6 In 2:2 Mount Zion is elevated above the surrounding hills; here it is protected by divine symbols reminiscent of the journey out of Egypt (Ex 13:21;14:19 – 20). The protective symbols will not move, as they did during the exodus; for the future Mount Zion is journey's end. The word *bārā'* ("create"; GK 1343), used in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and never applied in the OT to any but divine acts, is a favorite later in Isaiah to denote realities brought into being by the Creator in his new and final purpose (cf., e.g., Isa 41:20; 45:8; 48:7;

65:17 – 18).

The glory thus seen over all Jerusalem, and not just in its temple (cf. 24:23; 60:1 – 2, 19; Rev 21:23;22:5), will itself be protected by a canopy, normally used for weddings and royal occasions. The bridal implications of 5:1 suggest this is in view here. It will protect the city from the natural elements (4:6; cf.32:2). Oswalt (in loc.) says,"Some have felt this mention of the sun and the rain to be somewhat mundane and thus to offer rather a weak conclusion to the segment. However, when it is remembered that in a pagan worldview the natural forces are deities to be feared, this assertion gains considerable strength."

The picture in these verses is glorious and certainly lacks complete fulfillment as yet. The returning exiles did not experience such idyllic conditions, though Haggai traced this disappointment not so much to the purpose of God as to their own sin (Hag 1:5 – 9). For the general interpretation of such passages as these, see the Introduction, pp. 449 – 50.

NOTES

3 כָּל־הַכָּתוּב לַחַיִּים (*kol-hakkātûb laḥayyîm,* "all who are recorded among the living") is an expression drawn from the recording practices of the Near East (cf. 49:16; Ex 32:32 – 33; Pss 69:28; 139:16; Jer 22:30;Eze 13:9; Da 12:1; Mal 3:16; cf. *ZPEB* 1:637; *TDNT*, 1:619 – 20).

4 דָּמִים (*dāmîm,* "bloodstains") is in the plural, as in 1:15. In this form it normally suggests blood violently shed.

5 The LXX reads, "Then Yahweh will come on every dwelling place on Mount Zion and on her assemblies as a cloud by day." Mauchline (in loc.) favors this as "much nearer to the style of the wilderness narrative of Exodus," although Wildberger (in loc.) supports the MT.

F. The Parable of the Vineyard (5:1 – 7)

OVERVIEW

For exquisite beauty of language and consummate skill in effective communication, this parable is virtually peerless. One difficulty of a literary masterpiece is that a would-be translator who is not the literary equal of the author faces an impossible task.Delitzsch (in loc.) says of this poem, “The fugitive rhythm, the musical euphony, the charming assonances in this appeal, it is impossible to reproduce.”It is in fact an outstanding example of the way the Spirit of prophecy employed human language to convey the divine message. The parabolic form and the figure of the vineyard dominate the passage, but there is much diversity within this unity. It starts as a lyric, becomes a courtroom drama, and finally casts the figurative aside to identify Judah as the object of the Lord’s judgment. Some (e.g., Motyer, 1993, in loc.) suggest that the song may have been sung at the Feast of Tabernacles, which occurred at the time of the fruit harvest.

1 I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.

2 He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit.

3 “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and men of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

4 What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?

5 Now I will tell you
what I am going to do to my vineyard:
I will take away its hedge,
and it will be destroyed;

I will break down its wall,
and it will be trampled.
6 I will make it a wasteland,
neither pruned nor cultivated,
and briers and thorns will grow there.
I will command the clouds
not to rain on it."
7 The vineyard of the LORD Almighty
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah
are the garden of his delight.
And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed;
for righteous ness, but heard cries of distress.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Roleplay was used from time to time by the OT prophets (cf. Zec 11:4 – 17). Here Isaiah assumes the guise of a folk singer. Did he actually sing the words to a folk tune of the day? Perhaps, or the Spirit may simply have given Isaiah the prophecy in lyrical form. Possibly (cf. Notes) the song was at first a love song and the singer played the part of the friend of the bridegroom (the "best man" in our parlance; cf. John the Baptist [Jn 3:29 – 30]). If so, the bride and groom are depicted figuratively in terms of a vineyard and its owner.

The use of "vineyard" or garden for a bride is often found in the Song of Solomon (SS 2:15; 4:16 – 5:1;6:1 – 2; 8:12), and it may have been recognized as a stock metaphor. The constant use of assonance in these verses and the choice of the gentler consonantal sounds, especially in the first verse, would have induced in the hearers a sense of complacent enjoyment. Not till the last clause of v.2 do they discover that the song tells a sad, not a glad, story.

3 – 4 What a dramatic change! The scene shifts to a courtroom (cf. 1:2 – 17; 3:13 – 15). This time the human hearers are to act as assessors as they hear a direct message from the owner of the vineyard himself. The new form suggests, of course, that the "vineyard" has moral responsibility. The more discerning listeners may have the first intimation that the parable may not be for their comfort. It would be interesting to know whether the prophet's use of the "vineyard" analogy in 3:14 predates or postdates this parable. Gitay, 99, remarks, "The transfer to the first person . . . switches the focus onto the speaker himself .

. . . Such a device allows the prophet to confront his audience gradually: to hide himself behind his beloved one, and then, at the right moment, to appear on the stage as the opponent." This is true, but we must remember that here the prophet represents the Lord, whose word he delivers.

5 – 6 The abandonment of such an unprofitable venture is only to be expected, for who would waste further energy, time, and money? But there is more than this. Definite action — the removal of its hedges and wall (v.5) — will be taken against it.The hidden meaning comes closer to complete unveiling when the last statement of v.6 is uttered. What human owner can control the weather? This is God!Watts (in loc.) points out that the two uses of "now"(vv.3 and 5) mark turning points in the song.

The phrase "briers and thorns" occurs later (e.g., in 7:23 – 24; 32:13 cf. 34:13; 55:13) in connection with divine judgment, and these passages may be intentional reminders of this basic parabolic presentation of God's wrath against his unfruitful people.

7 The hearers fall into a skillfully laid trap. The figurative form is cast off, and God's people stand exposed as the guilty objects of his disappointment and his judgment. They have condemned themselves, for the tacit agreement of the hearers to the criticism of the vineyard can be assumed.

Thus Nathan secured David's self-condemnation (1Sa 12:1 – 14). Motyer (1999, in loc.) points out that the word translated "delight" occurs only here in Isaiah and that it really means "intense pleasure."So "fruitfulness does not simply violate the Lord's formal intention, it contradicts his heart."

It is not easy to bring out the powerful play on words in the Hebrew in v.7b, though some translators and many commentators have made the attempt. One of the best is from G. H. Box (*The Book of Isaiah* [London: Pitman, 1908], in loc.):"For measures He looked — but lo massacres! For right — and lo riot!"

There is a second edition of the vineyard parable in 27:2 – 6, where the emphasis is on God's gracious future plans for the vineyard. Jesus also used the same analogy in Mark 12:1 – 12 (and paral-lels), developing it still further, and there it is made explicit that the hearers are disconcerted to find they are actually

within the parable. Our Lord's version may show the influence of Isaiah 3:14, where the vineyard imagery is used in an indictment of the people's leaders.

NOTE

1 The description of the Lord as "the one I love" is most unusual. In fact, it is without parallel in the OT; for only if Song of Solomon is to be considered an allegory is there any similar use of endearment terms in relation to God. Attempts at textual emendation have not generally commended themselves to scholars. The suggestion — which has been popular since Lowth — that the poem begins as a love song is well discussed in Clements (in loc.) and Willis ("The Genre of Isaiah 5:1," *JBL* 96 [1977]: 337 – 62).

G. Condemnation of Judah's Sins (5:8 – 30)

OVERVIEW

The eighth-century prophets all condemned the social sins of the affluent society of their day. This passage is particularly reminiscent of Amos, for he too has "woe" oracles (Am 5:18; 6:1), often structured with the repetition of a key word or phrase.Moreover, just as in Amos 1 – 2 the threat of divine judgment came nearer and nearer home — so that it pointed eventually at Israel herself — so the woes here come to rest eventually on the prophet himself in 6:5 (see comment there).

8 Woe to you who add house to house
and join field to field
till no space is left
and you live alone in the land.

9 The LORD Almighty has declared in my hearing:
"Surely the great houses will become desolate,
the fine mansions left without occupants.

10 A ten-acre vineyard will produce only a bath of wine,
a homer of seed only an ephah of grain."

11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning
to run after their drinks,
who stay up late at night
till they are inflamed with wine.

12 They have harps and lyres at their banquets,
tambourines and flutes and wine,
but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD,
no respect for the work of his hands.

13 Therefore my people will go into exile
for lack of understanding;
their men of rank will die of hunger
and their masses will be parched with thirst.

14 Therefore the grave enlarges its appetite
and opens its mouth without limit;
into it will descend their nobles and masses
with all their brawlers and revelers.

15 So man will be brought low
and mankind humbled,

the eyes of the arrogant humbled.
16 But the LORD Almighty will be exalted by his justice,
and the holy God will show himself holy by his righteousness.
17 Then sheep will graze as in their own pasture;
lambs will feed among the ruins of the rich.
18 Woe to those who draw sin along with cords of deceit,
and wickedness as with cart ropes,
19 to those who say, “Let God hurry,
let him hasten his work
so we may see it.
Let it approach,
let the plan of the Holy One of Israel come,
so we may know it.”
20 Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter.
21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
and clever in their own sight.
22 Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine
and champions at mixing drinks,
23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
but deny justice to the innocent.
24 Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw
and as dry grass sinks down in the flames,
so their roots will decay
and their flowers blow away like dust;
for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty
and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.
25 Therefore the LORD ’s anger burns against his people;
his hand is raised and he strikes them down.
The mountains shake,
and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.
26 He lifts up a banner for the distant nations,
he whistles for those at the ends of the earth.
Here they come,
swiftly and speedily!
27 Not one of them grows tired or stumbles,
not one slumbers or sleeps;
not a belt is loosened at the waist,
not a sandal thong is broken.

28 Their arrows are sharp,
all their bows are strung;
their horses' hoofs seem like flint,
their chariot wheels like a whirlwind.
29 Their roar is like that of the lion,
they roar like young lions;
they growl as they seize their prey
and carry it off with no one to rescue.
30 In that day they will roar over it
like the roaring of the sea.
And if one looks at the land,
he will see darkness and distress;
even the light will be darkened by the clouds.

COMMENTARY

8 – 10 In an affluent society many do not profit from the increased wealth. Micah (Mic 2:1 – 2) in a similar "woe" criticizes those who coveted the landed property of others. The horror of the prophets at the coveting of land (cf. 1Ki 21:17 – 24) was almost certainly due to their recognition of the Deuteronomic principle expressed also in the book of Joshua — that the land really belonged to God and that he had made the various tribes and families stewards of it in perpetuity. O. Kaiser (in loc.)appropriately quotes Leviticus 25:23b as summing up the OT teaching about land: "The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants."

The first clause of v.9 reads literally, "The LORD Almighty is in my ears" (cf. 22:14), but the NIV has surely translated in accord with the intended sense. The rich have coveted and appropriated both house and land, and the judgment of God will descend on each.

The NIV supplies helpful footnotes aiding our understanding of v.10. It estimates the amount of wine at five gallons, and the seed and grain at six bushels and three-fifths of a bushel respectively.These figures strike a mean between some higher and lower estimates of the quantities intended. Whatever the measures in view, the main point is clear: there will be a minimal return for a large outlay (cf. Hag 1:5 – 6).

11 – 17 Drunkenness is condemned in a number of prophetic passages (v.22; 28:1 – 8; Hos 7:5;Am 6:6). Most societies consider early morning drinking a mark of moral degeneracy; for the man whose first waking thought is of drink is in its grip, and he cannot pull his weight in the work of the day (cf. Ecc 10:16; Ac 2:13 – 15). Wealth dubiously gathered (v.8) may well be dissolutely spent. The day that starts with drink ends in musical banquets when wine is drunk well into the night (v.11).These people have as little thought as pagan Bels-hazzar for the acts of the Lord (cf. Da 5), and like him they will suffer judgment at foreign hands. As in the previous "woe," the penalty is appropriate to the offense; for exile removes them from the land on which they had set their affections, and feasting and drinking will come to an abrupt end. "Lack of understanding" (v.13) relates to the outlook described in v.12b.

"The grave" (v.14) is the NIV's translation of *še,ôl* (simply transliterated as "Sheol" in the NASB), the place of the dead. The midnight revelers, their mouths open for more food and drink, will suddenly find they have themselves become the food of that hungriest of all monsters — death. Solidarity in punishment means that both "nobles and masses" will suffer the consequences of the sins of the wealthy. In 2 Sam uel 24:11 – 13 each of the punishments offered to David by the Lord involved the people as well.

Many commentators consider vv.14 – 16 to be out of place or a later addition from the hand of a redactor. For instance, Clements (in loc.) places them soon after 587 BC. Such views are largely due to the absence of a "woe," with the consequent disturbance of the ordered pattern of the passage and, for some commentators, the fact that some of the thought has more in common with the great oracle against the proud in 2:6 – 22.As we have seen, however, there are connections of both image and message between v.14 and vv.11 – 13.

Verse 16 is often regarded as summing up the connection between holiness and righ teous ness in Isaiah (see, e.g., N. H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* [London: Epworth, 1944], 51, 53). God's separateness from human beings is not only ontological but also moral; his holiness is not a simple synonym for his majesty (though majesty is an element in it; cf., e.g., Ex 15:11) but more — the basis in his eternal character of his righteous judgments on sinners. The moral nature of divine holiness finds one of its most awesome expressions in ch. 6.

Verse 17 continues the theme, for it shows the affluent agricultural society of the day (cf. vv.9 – 10) reverting to a more thoroughly pastoral one, with the animals taking over the ruins. This suggests incidentally that the various woes of this section are directed against the same people, just as the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1 – 11) relate to the same people but in terms of different qualities.

18 – 19 Isaiah was fond of the picture of the burden-bearer (cf. 53:6; 57:10 and comments at 1:4, 14, 24). At this point (5:18) he pictures sinful Judah not now as "loaded with guilt" (1:4), as though it were on her back, but as though she were pulling it as a heavy load. The pictures are different, their import the same. Acceptance of deceit, the big lie (cf. 5:20), sets their feet on sin's wearying treadmill.Paul uses a similar analogy in Romans 6:23. In this way it is implied that sin carries something of its judgment within itself.

Verse 19 sums up the people's sin and exhibits its true nature as cynical rejection of the living God and all his ways. Barton, 49, comments, "In Isaiah, as in hardly any other prophet, we are told about the underlying *attitudes* or states of mind of those who are condemned." The people imply that nothing is happening, a taunt Isaiah himself used against pagan deities in 41:21 – 24. But the "woe" with which this section commences is the prophet's witness to his faith that God will act in judgment on sin — in his own time (cf. 2Pe 3:3 – 7). Incidentally, note that the phrase "the Holy One of Israel" here is probably uttered by the people with a curl of the lip, in contemptuous reference to a distinctive note of Isaiah's prophetic message (cf. 30:11 – 12).

20 This "woe" has a link with the previous one (v.18), for there "deceit" is expounded as skepticism about the ways of God. Unhappily it is an easy journey from such skepticism to the total reversal of values that this verse demonstrates, for God is the source of all values. If we are wrong about him, we can soon be wrong about everything. The Pharisees' rejection of Christ showed itself in the same way, for they attributed the works of the Holy Spirit to Beelzebub (Mk 3:22 – 30).

21 This verse, too, may have a link with the previous "woe," for the reversal of values expressed there (v.20) may form the basis for the new "wisdom" of the godless, which is antagonistic to the divine wisdom (cf. 1Co 1:17; 2:16; 3:18 – 23). The relationship with earlier "woes" also comes into clearer focus when we

note that עֵצָה (“plan,” v.19) is often rendered “counsel” or even “wisdom.”

22 – 23 Verse 21 condemned the outlook of those who thought themselves wise, while v.22 exposes the folly of that “wisdom.” These men assess themselves as heroes and champions. Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out that “heroes” and “champions” represent “the sarcastic use of terms of military honour as if to say, ‘See, they have medals for it!’ ” In fact, they are not uttering sober judgments, for it is their drink that is talking. They have only the drunkard’s courage, so ridiculously subjective as to invite scorn. The situation is even more scandalous when we learn that they occupied positions of great responsibility, needing a clear head and an unweakened moral sense. In the place of justice, they have acted corruptly (cf. 1:23; 10:1 – 2).

24 – 25 The series of “woes” is over. The last of them was pronounced against evil judges; now the supreme Judge begins to declare sentence. The fire of God will burn them; the hand of God will smite them. In 40:6 – 8 the prophet likens human life to grass and flowers, doomed to wither and die.Here he uses them as figures of judgment because they are so vulnerable to fire. To those familiar with grassland fires, the illustration suggests comprehensiveness and swiftness as well as the inexorable character of the judgment.The cause spelled out in detail in the preceding woes is summarily expressed as rejection of God’s word. The word “law” (*tôrâ*) is technical enough to suggest a reference to the Mosaic law — the basis of Israel’s God-given moral standard — and at the same time general enough to include Isaiah’s own authoritative teaching.

Verse 25 seems to refer to a specific judgment not to be regarded as an isolated event but as a manifestation of that divine anger that continued to burn against the people.The mention of mountains shaking and dead bodies lying in the streets would be appropriate if Isaiah had in mind the great earthquake in the days of Uzziah (Am 1:1; Zec 14:5).This would be a deeply disturbing memory in the minds of many of his hearers, and he may have lived through it himself.

26 – 30 What a gift of vivid description was given to this great prophet! The “still” of v.26a becomes a “movie” almost at once and finally a “talkie” in vv.29 – 30. The picture makes such an immediate appeal to the imagination that it requires little exposition. The great judgment, anticipated by the earthquake (cf. comment at v.25), is to come through a great army from afar — swift, single-

minded, effective, ferocious, and altogether terrifying. A “banner” (v.26; cf. 11:10, 12 and esp. 13:2) is raised by God as a rallying point for his punishing army. He will whistle to them like a beekeeper (see comment on 7:18).

The phrase “the ends of the earth” (v.26) is hyperbole, for the Assyrians are in view, although, as Oswalt (in loc.) says, “For Isaiah, at that point, it was not so important to specify who the destroyers would be as it was to indicate the imminent, irresistible and wholly-to-be-expected nature of what lay ahead.” The references to sea and land in v.30 find their best explanation if we notice that the former occurs in a simile while the latter is literal. The prophet’s thought moves from the figure of the roaring lion (v.29) to that of the roaring sea; and then, perhaps, calling to mind the literal sea — which might have been a means of escape from the foe if it had been less turbulent — he declares that there is no hope landward either. The cloud of Assyrian judgment blots out any light that may have indicated an escape route.

NOTES

14 The feminine singular termination ה (translated in the NIV by “their”) is probably a reference to Jerusalem (cf. 3:26; cf. NASB).

17 The MT here is difficult, but Wildberger is correct when he says that simply removing the verse as a gloss is too easy. Most commentators and translators accept the LXX’s reading of “lambs” as authentic rather than the MT’s “strangers” because it fits the parallelism better.

25b – 30 Many scholars have raised questions about the positioning of this material. O. Kaiser, for example, treats 6:1 – 9:7 as an interpolation (see his comments on 9:8 – 21). Many different attempts have been made to reconstruct the original text. As Oswalt (in loc.) says, “The variety of these attempts calls into question the validity of the enterprise.” It must be said that the text as it stands makes consistently good sense. The metaphor of the hand stretched out in judgment occurs in other passages in Isaiah (cf.14:26 – 27; 65:2), and it is not impossible that Isaiah could have used a stylized expression of it in more than one oracle.

H. The Vision and Call of the Holy One (6:1 – 13)

OVERVIEW

The position of this great passage in Isaiah has aroused much discussion, as a glance at any of the larger commentaries will show. We might have expected the volume of Isaiah's collected prophecies to begin with it, as the account of Jeremiah's call did (see Jer 1). P. Ackroyd (*Isaiah 1 – 12: Presentation of a Prophet* [VTSup 29; Leiden: Brill, 1978], 16 – 48) gives the matter extended treatment in the context of his thesis that chs. 1 – 12 have been deliberately organized to highlight Isaiah's message of threatened judgment and promised salvation.This book is in fact not alone in deferring reference to the call of God to a later passage (cf. Am 7:14 – 15).

In fact, our difficulty may well reflect modern, Western individualism, for the Bible teaches that the message is far more important than the messenger (Php 1:15 – 18). Conrad, 34, points out the infrequency of Isaiah's name in the book (in contrast to the frequency of Jeremiah's in his prophecy), so clearly the man himself is not the main interest of the book. If Isaiah's oracles are arranged according to a plan determined by the message, we will see that the location of this chapter is just perfect (see comment on v.5).

Like Ackroyd, Oswalt sees the arrangement as theologically motivated, although he views the organization of chs. 1 – 12 differently, seeing chs.1 – 5 as dealing with broad issues in a general way, whereas chs. 7 – 12 focus on a particular historical event. He does agree, however, that the position of ch. 6 makes it both a fitting conclusion to the chapters that precede it and a suitable introduction to those that follow.

Another possibility is that this chapter is not a "call narrative" as normally understood, but an account of a special commission involving the redirection of a prophetic ministry already begun.Hayes and Irvine (in loc.) give a clear summary of the main arguments for this view. N. Habel ("The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,"*ZAW* 77 [1965]: 297 – 323) has pointed out,

however, that most of the characteristic marks of a call narrative occur in this chapter, although he also notes that it has marked similarities to the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:19 – 21, which is clearly not a call narrative. We should note that the date it contains is early, so that if this is not Isaiah's call (and the case against this is inconclusive), it must then relate to some experience taking place soon after his call.We will assume it does record his call.

Verse 1 contains one of the book's few references to dates, and it introduces a section in the first person singular, comparable in certain ways with the "we" passages in the book of Acts. The last instance of this phenomenon is in 8:18, so some commentators argue that the autobiographical section terminates at that point. Others take it as far as 9:7 because of the links of vocabulary and thought that bind these later verses to what precedes them.

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train
of his robe filled the temple. 2Above him were seraphs, each with six wings:With two wings they
covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3And they
were calling to one another:
"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."
4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with
smoke.
5"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of
unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."
6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs
from the altar. 7With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt
is taken away and your sin atoned for."
8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"And I
said, "Here am I. Send me!"
9 He said, "Go and tell this people:
" 'Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving.'
10 Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."
11 Then I said, "For how long, O Lord?"
And he answered:
"Until the cities lie ruined

and without inhabitant,
until the houses are left deserted
and the fields ruined and ravaged,
12 until the LORD has sent everyone far away
and the land is utterly forsaken.
13 And though a tenth remains in the land,
it will again be laid waste.
But as the terebinth and oak
leave stumps when they are cut down,
so the holy seed will be the stump in the land."

COMMENTARY

1 The date of Uzziah's death has been much disputed (see Introduction, p. 437). Isaiah 14:28 – 32 is an oracle from the year of the death of King Ahaz, and it has a clear appropriateness to the political situation of that time. We should not be surprised, therefore, to find something similar here. We can well imagine the spiritual value to the prophet himself of a vision of the almighty King when an earthly reign of over fifty years had come — or was coming — to its end. Remember, too, that although in general terms Uzziah had been a good king, eventually he was judged by God for a particular sin (2Ch 26:16 – 23), so it is not surprising that this chapter has much to say about sin.The vision of the Lord's transcendence never left Isaiah — the exaltation of Israel's great God is a frequent theme in his oracles (cf., e.g., 2:10 – 22;37:16; 40:22; 57:15).

What does "temple" signify here — the earthly or the heavenly place of worship? Virtually all modern commentators assume the former, though Delitzsch is an important exception. Some of the older commentators, including Young, who did assume that the earthly temple was intended, doubted whether the prophet was physically present in it and thought it possible that he may have been transported there in a vision. It is impossible to be certain, but happily it makes little difference to our understanding of the chapter and its message.

2 This is the only biblical passage where heavenly beings are called "seraphs." It is evident from references in Scripture to angels, archangels, principalities, powers, cherubim, seraphim, and so on, that great variety existed among the heavenly beings created by God. This should occasion no surprise, for the created earth, too, is the scene of great diversity.

The seraphs are bright creatures, for the word means “burning ones”; yet they hide their faces from the greater brightness and glory of the Lord.Matthew 22:30 does not explicitly deny that angels have sex organs, so covering their feet as a euphemism for these cannot be completely ruled out.Covering the feet may also suggest humility.

3 There is no indication of the number of seraphs seen by Isaiah. Many scholars think he was present at an act of worship in the temple, perhaps at the new year, and that the antiphonal singing of the Levitical choir was echoed by the heavenly seraphs of his vision. This is conjectural but cannot be ruled out. The apostle Paul evidently believed that angels are present at Christian worship. It is interesting that the chief passage in which this idea appears (1Co 11:2 – 16) deals with veiling and unveiling in the presence of God, referred to also here.

The trisagion, or threefold ascription of holiness (cf. Rev 4:8), has been interpreted in reference to the Trinity since the early fathers. Cautious commentators, including Calvin, are inclined to play this down somewhat. He says (in loc.), “The ancients quoted this passage when they wished to prove that there are three persons in one essence of the Godhead. I do not disagree with their opinion; but if I had to contend with heretics, I would rather choose to employ stronger proofs.” It is best for us simply to say that — in the fuller light of the NT — we can see the aptness of this threefold expression, which also places added stress on the holiness of the heavenly King. We go to the NT for clear Trinitarian teaching and to the OT for hints of it.

The theme of divine holiness is of towering importance in Isaiah (see Introduction, pp. 448 – 49).This man of God could never forget the disclosure of transcendent purity he encountered when he was called to prophetic service (cf. Eze 1).

The language of fullness, employing the same Hebrew verb (*mal*m*e* ,m; GK 4848), occurs three times in these verses (vv.1, 3 – 4), twice in application to the temple and once to the whole earth. So this passage, insisting as it does on the awesome transcendence of the sovereign God, also emphatically teaches his immanence. His transcendence is not remoteness or aloofness but is known through his presence in his created world and temple. Divine transcendence and

immanence are always held in balance in biblical theism. Isaiah himself expresses this later when he says (12:6), “Great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

The word “glory” (kābôd; GK 3883) is used of God in his manifestation to his creatures. The essence of deity is inscrutable, but something of his glory can be seen if God is pleased to disclose it (Ex 33:17 – 23; Eze 1:28). The Targum on Isaiah also employs the word in v.1, with its rendering “I saw the glory of the Lord.” After quoting Isaiah 6:10, John said that Isaiah “saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him” (Jn 12:41). This NIV rendering takes “his” to be Jesus, which is consistent with the context. This amazing statement is in fact altogether consistent with the high Christology of the NT writers, for Jesus is God incarnate, and the same God is revealed in both Old and New Testaments.This may in fact suggest that John understood the trisagion in Trinitarian terms.

4 God’s power is sometimes manifested in a physical tremor (cf. Ex 19:18; Ac 4:31) and his presence in cloud or smoke (cf. Ex 33:9; Isa 4:5). So the God who normally hides himself from the senses occasionally makes himself known in a form accessible to them, and he has ultimately done so in the consummate unveiling of himself in his Son (1Jn 1:1 – 4).

5 The word translated “woe” here (ôy; GK 208) is different from that used several times in ch. 5 (hôy; [GK 2098], vv.8, 11, 20 – 22), though they are similar in form and pronunciation and identical in meaning. They are, in fact, synonyms, each possessing various nuances ranging from a threat to a sigh.

If this part of the book has been arranged with an eye more to its message than to its chronology, this “woe” may have been viewed as the climax of the series that began at 5:8. The reference in this verse to the people’s sin strengthens this possibility, the more so as sins of the tongue have found their place in ch. 5 at least twice (5:18 – 20) and possibly a third time, for acquittal (5:23) was made known by a pronouncement of the judge.

This verse teaches us that in order to be an effective channel for God’s penetrating word, the power of that word must be felt in the person’s own conscience.Wildberger (in loc.) says, “This terror is itself an element of the theophany (cf. Ge 32:30;Ex 3:6; Jdg 6:22; 13:22). Those who utter such a cry of

woe about themselves are witnessing to the fact that their very existence is threatened" (cf. also Watts, in loc.).

It is true that the lips of the prophet were destined to proclaim God's truth; but if he was in the temple at worship (see comment on v.1), the primary reference may be to the defiled lips of the worshiper (cf. 1:15; 29:13). The people of the OT always felt a deep apprehension at the prospect of seeing God (Ge 32:20; Ex 33:20; Jdg 6:22; 13:21 – 22). This must have been underlined still more for Isaiah as he saw even the unfallen seraphs covering their faces in the presence of the Most High.

6 – 7 To serve God, Isaiah needed to be a clean instrument. It is the God of burning holiness himself (cf. 33:13 – 16) who provides this cleansing from the sacrificial altar. There are indications elsewhere in the OT of the purifying efficacy of fire (Nu 31:22 – 23; Mal 3:2). Despite the priestly context of both these passages, however, it is too much to say, with I. Engnell (*The Call of Isaiah* [Uppsala: Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift, 1949], 31 – 32), that Israel must have had a regular ritual of cleansing by fire.

Is there any connection between the fact that the seraphs are "burning ones" (see comment on v.2) and the fact that the instrument of purification administered to the prophet by one of them burns? Isaiah, like many other OT writers, had a strong etymological awareness, especially in connection with names (cf. 7:3; 8:1 – 4). He may well have learned from this experience that sinful human beings can join in the worship of the "burning ones" only when purified by the fire of God (cf. 4:4). It is his holiness expressed in sacrifice that burns away sin (cf. 33:13 – 16).

8 As we have already noted at v.3, biblical teaching presents beautiful balance. This is true in relation to a multitude of themes, and another example occurs here. The message of God to Isaiah in vv.9 – 10 is strongly predestinarian. How appropriate, therefore, that the verse preceding them should place such emphasis on the prophet's responsibility! He is not coerced into service; rather, his will makes its ready response as a grateful reaction to God's forgiving grace. No doubt Isaiah's readiness was itself the product of divine grace, but this is not where the stress falls here. Instead, we see him faced with the challenge to personal commitment.

The plural “us” is often linked theologically with v.3 (see comment) and interpreted in terms of the Trinity. It is an unusual phenomenon, found elsewhere in the OT only in Genesis (Ge 1:26; 11:7; cf.also Isa 41:21 – 23). Many modern scholars, taking it to be a plural of consultation, see it both here and in Genesis as implying a council of heavenly beings.There are, of course, many biblical passages that picture God as surrounded by the heavenly hosts. In a context that speaks both of waters and mountains (and so of nature) and of nations (and so, by implication, also of history), however, the Lord refutes the notion that he consulted others in his work of creation (40:13 – 14). If Isaiah 6 and 40 have the same author (see Introduction, pp. 438– 48), it seems most unlikely that consultation with a heavenly council is in view here. Moreover in Daniel, what a pagan king may have attributed to “the decree of the watchers” (Da 4:17, KJV) Daniel called “the decree of the Most High” (Da 4:24).

It is true that 1 Kings 22:19 – 23 pictures God as consulting with heavenly beings, but it is doubtful whether we should interpret literally a highly dramatic vision with details probably chosen to give vividness to a solemn message. GKC (par.124g, n.2) takes “us” as a plural of self-deliberation.Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out that “the New Testament relates these verses to both the Lord Jesus (Jn. 12:24) and the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25), thus finding here what will yet accommodate the full revelation of the Holy Trinity.”

9 – 10 The suggestion made by some modern scholars that this passage was written only after Isaiah had already experienced the people’s hardness of heart illustrates how the same conclusion may be reached by different paths. For some, it is a consequence of rationalistic presuppositions of the same order as the idea that our Lord’s predictions of his passion were manufactured by the church *ex eventu* (after the fact). We must insist that not only did the Lord Almighty know what would occur, but he also planned it, for he is King (vv.1, 5). Watts (in loc.) comments, “As evangelists to bring the nations to repentance, the eighth-century prophets, indeed the great seventh-century prophets, were remarkably unsuccessful. This commission insists that this was not their task” (see also Barton, 76 – 77).

It should be said, however, that if ch. 6, as some think, is not so much Isaiah’s call as the divine steering of his ministry in a slightly different direction, and if

chronologically it follows ch. 5, then the prophet had already been an instrument of God's warning to his people, and we may find a parallel in the way that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart are presented together in Exodus (Ex 4:21; 8:15; et al.).In fact, it was after many centuries of his people's rebelliousness that God reveals to Isaiah his intent to judge them; yet at the same time, as we see in v.13, he also intends to further his purpose of grace for them.

Some commentators consider the phrase "this people" (v.9) to be contemptuous, but O. Kaiser (in loc.) makes the relevant comment that it is not normally so in the OT (referring to Ex 3:21; 5:22;17:4; 18:18; Nu 11:14; Dt 5:28; Jos 1:2; Mic 2:11;Hag 1:2). Nevertheless, passages from Isaiah (e.g 9:16 and esp. 29:13) do suggest a measure of contempt. It is not possible to be sure.

The words of God to Isaiah are quoted in each of the Gospels (Mt 13:14 – 15; Mk 4:10 – 12; Lk 8:10; Jn 12:39 – 41) and twice by Paul (Ac 28:26 – 27; Ro 11:8). Each quotation is a comment on the rejection of God's word in Christ. The references in the Synoptic Gospels are of particular interest; for they are all connected with the parable of the sower, which, like this present passage, anticipates widespread failure to make proper response to the word of God but which also, as here (v.13), shows cause for hope. The holy seed of the vision finds its NT counterpart in the good soil of the parable.

There is special interest, too, in the quotations in John and Acts, for they connect the words with Christ and with the Holy Spirit respectively. John 12:37 – 41 is deeply impressive, for it comes at an important point in the gospel, at the close of the public ministry of Jesus, and it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that John is saying that it was the glory of Christ Isaiah saw on this occasion.

Once again we are impressed by the structure of the book, for this chapter immediately follows and precedes examples of wrong reaction to God's word. In 5:24 it is the people who reject it, and in ch. 7 Ahaz refuses it. Note also the statement in 8:17 that God "is hiding his face from the house of Jacob." Through his prophets of that generation, God warns his rebellious people that both the declaration of his word (Am 8:11 – 14) and the grace of repentance in response to it are in the sovereign hand of God the King. We should note also that this

hardening judgment is pronounced after centuries of his people's defective hearing of his word, and so it may be seen to be judicial as well as sovereign.

11 – 12 Delitzsch is probably correct in seeing Isaiah's question (v.11) as related to both the duration and the consequences of his prophetic ministry.The tone of the question is one of lament (cf. Pss 13:2; 74:10; 79:5; 80:4; 89:46; 94:3; Hab 1:2; Zec 1:12). It should not be assumed that the prophets found God's message of judgment easy to utter (cf. Jer 1:6 – 8, 17; Eze 2:3 – 8; et al.). They themselves belonged to the nation they addressed and must often, like Jeremiah, have wept for its sins and its certain judgment (Jer 9:1; 14:17). The opening chapters of Isaiah (as well as later passages) record material both from the events of his day (Isa 1:7 – 9) and from oracles of future judgment (e.g., 3:25 – 26; 5:8 – 9, 13, 17), illustrating these verses.

13 The devastation, great as it will be, will not be total; but even its survivors must submit to further judgment. The illustration from nature introduces an element of hope. God has so ordered the plant kingdom that almost total destruction does not always extinguish life. Similarly, God has a continuing purpose of life for the remnant of his people (see the important comment at 4:2). Motyer (1999, in loc.) says, "This chapter is pervaded by the thought of death: the dying king (1), the prophet under sentence of death (5), the sacrificial animal dead on the altar (6) and the felled tree (13). . . .Death seems to spell the end but is found not to be so." The word "seed" in this verse suggests a possible link with the promise given to Abraham that his seed would continue and be blessed by God (Ge 17:1 – 8; cf. Isa 51:2).

The concept of the seed may take its place with "branch" and "servant" as subject to significant development within Isaiah (see the extended comment at 4:2). It is purely biological, for example, at 5:10 and 55:10; designates the people as evil and under judgment in 1:4 (NIV, "brood"), 14:20 (NIV, "offspring"), 57:3 – 4; presents the remnant after judgment here in 6:13; and refers to the "progeny"of the Servant of the Lord in 53:10 (NIV, "off-spring"). Most frequent of all is the concept of the seed of Jacob that is destined for blessing (e.g., 43:5 [NIV, "children"]; 44:3 [NIV, "offspring"]; 54:3;66:22 [NIV, both "descendants"]).

How astounding that God should use the word "holy" (qōdes) of the remnant of

his people when this word has already been used in v.3 in relation to his own transcendent being. This is condescending grace indeed!

NOTES

1 שָׂרָף (*sārāp*, "seraph") also appears in Numbers 21:6, 8; Deuteronomy 8:15; and Isaiah 14:29; 30:6 in reference to serpents. Young (in loc.) says, "More cautious commentators . . . have recognized that the only relationship is to be found in the name." See also "Seraphim," *ZPEB*, 5:349.

5 נִדְמֵיתִי (*nidmēti*, "I am ruined!"; GK 1950) has been much discussed.Young's note (in loc.) is helpful, and his discussion of the problems of this whole chapter is particularly full. He acknowledges that it is difficult to determine the force of the verb precisely but sees it as meaning, "I have been made to cease, I am cut off, undone, doomed to die."

13 The NIV, NASB, and TEV follow the MT, and the NIV translates, "but as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down." The NEB, however, translates, "Like an oak or a terebinth, a sacred pole thrown out from its place in a hillshrine." This follows 1QIsaa plus a conjectural emendation (see discussions in Young and Clements [in loc.]). Many modern commentators consider the last clause of the verse a later addition modifying the picture of total judgment given up to that point; they follow the RSV in understanding the reference to a stump to relate to the tenth before its final destruction. The omission of this clause in the LXX supports this, but it is present in 1QIsaa and harmonizes with the general Isaianic remnant doctrine. Wildberger (in loc.) contends for its genuineness. It should be retained.

I. The Sign of Shear-Jashub (7:1 – 9)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 7:1 – 9:7 has a certain unity, not only in its historical background but also on account of the children with symbolic names who feature so prominently in it. Motyer (1999, p. 15) says that this section takes as its major theme a subsidiary topic from the preceding section, something he sees to be characteristic of the whole book of Isaiah. In this case it is the Davidic theme, based on 1:26, where "the coming glory of Zion" is anticipated in Davidic terms.

The "day of Midian's defeat" (9:4), which occurs near its close, reveals another important emphasis of this whole section. The day of Midian was God's great victory over a mighty horde through a weak human leader commanding a tiny force of soldiers who did not even use proper weapons (Jdg 6 – 7).They were forced to "trust and obey," for there was "no other way" that victory was possible in such a situation. The same lesson of trust in the face of superior foes is taught in these chapters in Isaiah.Through things that are not, God brings to nothing the things that are, so that no flesh in his presence may glory (cf. 1Co 1:25 – 31).

1 When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah
son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not
overpower it.
2 Now the house of David was told, "Aram has allied itself with Ephraim"; so the hearts of Ahaz and
his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.
3 Then the LORD said to Isaiah, "Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of
the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field. 4 Say to him,'Be careful,
keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of
firewood — because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. 5 Aram,
Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, 6 "Let us invade Judah; let us tear it
apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it." 7 Yet this is what
the Sovereign LORD says:
" 'It will not take place,
it will not happen,
8 for the head of Aram is Damascus,

and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.
Within sixty-five years
Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.
9 The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.
If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all.' "

COMMENTARY

1 For the historical background, see the Introduction, p. 437. It is clear from 2 Kings 15:37 that the alliance of the two northern kings against Judah began before Jotham died. The challenge to Ahaz's faith, therefore, came early in his reign and, given a different response from his, could have established him in a relationship of dependent trust on the Lord from the beginning.

The reference to Uzziah may be purely conventional, or it may form a studied link with 6:1 (so Sweeney, in loc.), thus hinting at the undoubted spiritual connection between the two chapters (see comment on 6:9 – 10). God's supreme kingship exalts him as sovereign, not only over Judah in the days of its earthly king's demise, but also over Rezin, Pekah, and the great Assyrian monarch himself. Chapter 6 predicts unbelief; ch. 7 records its historical manifestation.

2 The designation of Ahaz as "the house of David" (cf. v.13) is unusual. This phrase perhaps underlines the sin inherent in his fear and in his failure to believe; for the security of David's house,to which he belonged, was guaranteed by the divine word (2Sa 7).

3 Gitay, 131, points out that there is symbolism in the very fact that Isaiah takes his son with him when he confronts Ahaz. The king, in his compromise with paganism, had sacrificed his son (2Ki 16:3). "The living son not only symbolizes the future but also protests against the sacrifice of the king's son."

The name "Shear-Jashub" is, of course, symbolic, as the NIV margin makes clear (viz., "a remnant will return"). We do not know the age of the boy.If his name was given at birth, its choice may have been determined by the disclosure of the future given to the prophet at his call (6:13). There is a double ambiguity

in it. It can suggest either warning or hope and also either physical return from exile or spiritual return to God. Perhaps this ambiguity at both levels is intentional, for all four ideas can be justified from one or more passages in the book. Without doubt the element of warning is prominent in the present context.

The meeting place of prophet and king is precisely identified, but unlike the original readers, we cannot now place it with certainty. The reason for its choice is clearer. An adequate water supply is imperative for a city under siege. The king is probably satisfying himself as to this or making arrangements for its improvement. He is therefore engaged in an activity directly related to the situation described in v.1, and it provides the setting for God's test of his faith and obedience.

4 How emphatic is Isaiah's exhortation! A verb commanding attention — "be careful" — is followed by three others counseling trust instead of fear. This is further reinforced by the description of the two kings. Their anger may be fierce, but there is little real fire left in them — they are virtually impotent.

5 – 6 There is a touch of contempt in the way the personal name of the usurper-elect is omitted (cf."son of Remaliah" in vv.4 – 5). "The son of Tabeel"(v.6) cannot be identified with certainty, though, in view of the reference to "the house of David" (v.2), it is unlikely that he belonged to the authentic royal line of Judah.

7 – 9 The message of reassurance in v.7 is clear, and the NIV brings out the sense by inserting "only" (not in the Hebrew) in vv.8 – 9. The rulers of the two small kingdoms to the north are but human beings; they cannot stand against the decree of the sovereign Lord (v.7). The parenthetical statement of v.8b has been variously interpreted. It is probably best to view the prophecy as fulfilled in a series of events that included Tiglath-Pileser's imminent invasion, the fall of Samaria to Sargon II, and eventually the racial mixture introduced to Ephraim by yet another Assyrian emperor, Esar-haddon, about sixty-five years after this oracle (see Young, in loc., for a fuller discussion of the time reference here).

The verbs translated "stand firm in your faith"and "stand" are closely related in Hebrew. Their assonance makes Isaiah's closing utterance both striking and memorable. They would stay in the mind of Ahaz as a somber summary of the

message he has received and rejected (cf. vv.12 – 13, 17). Motyer (1999, in loc.) suggests the somewhat crude “trust or bust” because the original is itself blunt.

NOTES

2 שׁכן (*nûaḥ*, “to rest”; NIV, “allied . . . with”; GK 5663) is a favorite with this prophet. It occurs in v.19 (“settle”) and pictures foreign soldiers descending on the land like swarms of insects.The NASB’s rendering, “camped in” (cf. NIV margin, “has set up camp in”), may convey the intended sense. The prophet is probably saying that Aram’s army has established bases in Israel in the combined advance on Jerusalem.

3 There is a full discussion of the topography of this verse in M. Burrows, “The Conduit of the Upper Pool,” *ZAW* 70 (1958): 221 – 27. See also *ZPEB*, 5:434 – 37, and comment at 8:6.

6 שׁכן (*nûaḥ*, “Tabeel”) may be Aramean, the LXX spelling (*tabeēl*) lending support to this. In this case he was probably the nominee of Rezin.The name, as spelled by Isaiah, may be an intentional corruption of his real name to produce the mocking sense “Good for nothing” instead of “God is good.” Such intentional corruption is not uncommon; a modern parallel might be Winston Churchill’s drawled pronunciation of “Nazi” to make it approximate to “Nasty”! For documentation, see Clements and Wildberger (in loc.).

8 Many critics have problems with the time reference here, and some suggest emending the text to read “six or five years.” Oswalt (in loc.) aptly remarks, “The statement that an event sixty-five years in the future would be of no consequence to Ahaz misses the point. Like all of us, Ahaz was required to exercise faith in the veracity of God’s word at that moment, whether or not he lived to see the complete fulfillment of it.”

J. The Sign of Immanuel (7:10 – 25)

OVERVIEW

See the introductory note at 7:1 – 9. Is this section to be viewed as one oracle, or should we make a division after v.17? The latter hardly seems necessary, as the rest of the chapter is most naturally viewed as expounding the significance of the concluding clause of v.17. Moreover, there is a link between the curds and honey of vv.15 and 22.

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11 "Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest
depths or in the highest heights."
12 But Ahaz said, "I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test."
13 Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of men?
Will you try the patience of my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign:
The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel15 He will
eat curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. 16 But
before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings
you dread will be laid waste. 17 The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the
house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah — he will bring the
king of Assyria."
18 In that day the LORD will whistle for flies from the distant streams of Egypt and for bees from
the land of Assyria. 19 They will all come and settle in the steep ravines and in the crevices in the
rocks, on all the thornbushes and at all the water holes. 20 In that day the Lord will use a razor
hired from beyond the River — the king of Assyria — to shave your head and the hair of your
legs, and to take off your beards also. 21 In that day, a man will keep alive a young cow and two
goats. 22 And because of the abundance of the milk they give, he will have curds to eat. All who
remain in the land will eat curds and honey.23 In that day, in every place where there were a
thousand vines worth a thousand silver shekels, there will be only briers and thorns. 24 Men will
go there with bow and arrow, for the land will be covered with briers and thorns. 25 As for all the
hills once cultivated by the hoe, you will no longer go there for fear of the briers and thorns; they
will become places where cattle are turned loose and where sheep run.

COMMENTARY

10 – 11 This oracle probably followed closely on the previous one, for it is related to the same situation. It implies (see esp. “patience” in v.13) that the earlier prophecy was rejected or at least treated with noncommittal evasion by the king. If there was even a spark of faith in Ahaz, God was willing to give it an opportunity for expression. He had responded to Gideon’s repeated request for a sign, even though it followed a clear revelation of his saving will (Jdg 6:14, 17 – 18, 36 – 40). Once again, as in the day of the Midianite menace (cf. 9:4), a superior foe is threatening the nation. God goes even further this time in his patience with human weakness, for he actually offers Ahaz, carte blanche, the unrestricted choice of a sign (v.11). In this overflowing gesture of grace, the possessive pronoun “your” reminds him of his special relationship to God as the chosen people’s king (cf. 1Sa 7:11 – 16;see also comment on v.14).

12 Ahaz has made his plans, and they do not include God. His reply is a monumental piece of hypocrisy. As O. Kaiser (in loc.) aptly puts it, “There are situations in which outward piety and inward unbelief are identical.” Ahaz probably has Deuteronomy 6:16 in mind. This may reveal at least some small attempt earlier in his life to come to grips with written Torah, which the king was obliged to know and follow (cf. Dt 17:14 – 20, esp. vv.18 – 19).Just as Satan later misused Scripture in the temptation of God’s Son — to which Jesus gave reply from the very verse Ahaz must have had in mind (Mt 4:6 – 7) — so here a godless king makes an inappropriate and unbelieving allusion to what God has said. It is not testing God to do as he asks.

13 Ahaz is still addressed as “house of David” (cf.v.2), with the implication of special promises and of a continuing dynasty; but here the prophet speaks of “my God” instead of “your God” (cf. v.11). Ahaz may be the current occupant of the divinely secured throne of David; but it is incumbent on him to hear the divine word through the prophet, who, unlike him, is in a sensitive and responsive relationship with God. It is that relationship that makes the king’s rejection of the prophetic word a trial of God’s patience and not simply the prophet’s. God is weary of his unbelief (cf. comment at 1:14).

14 – 17 This great passage is both important and difficult. P. D. Wegner, 63 – 137, deals at some length with the main issues and views before providing his own interpretation. We will here assume the integrity of the passage, for the text has come down to us whole, and a satisfying interpretation of it as a whole can be given. The main interpretations are as follows.

1. The mother is royal, perhaps the queen, and so the child is a royal prince, perhaps Hezekiah (J. Lindblom, *A Study on the Immanuel Section in Isaiah 7:1 – 9:6* [Lund: Gleerup, 1958], 41).
2. The mother is Isaiah's wife, and so the child is one of his sons (Clements, in loc.).
3. The prophecy does not refer to a specific mother and child but to mothers in Judah generally, who will give their offspring names symbolizing hope in God (cf. 1Sa 4:19 – 22; O. Kaiser, in loc.).
4. The mother is the Virgin Mary and the child Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 1:22 – 23; see Young, in loc.).
5. The mother is a royal contemporary of the prophet, whose child's name will symbolize the presence of God with his people and who will foreshadow the Messiah, in whom God will be incarnate (J. A. Alexander, in loc.).This view really combines views 1 and 4.

Before suggesting a solution, it may be helpful to set out the main facts and problems that a satisfactory interpretation must come to grips with.

1. The mother and child must be seen as a sign to Ahaz. In fact, the reference to the house of David may suggest that the sign will be significant for the whole dynasty.
2. Is the sign intended to be a promise or a threat, or even both?
3. Why does Isaiah use the word <*almâ* (GK 6625; translated "virgin" by the NIV and NASB and "young woman" by the RSV), and what is its exact significance here? This has been much disputed. See Notes.
4. Does the Hebrew perfect tense in v.14 mean "will be" (as the NIV translates it) or "is"or "has been"? Grammatically all three are possible.
5. Does Immanuel mean "God is with us" or "God with us"? Either is possible.
6. What is the significance of curds and honey (cf. v.22)? Do they suggest plenty and perhaps a secure tenure in the Promised Land (cf. Ex 3:8, 17; Dt 6:3; 11:9; 32:13 – 15), do they furnish a link with David (cf. 1Sa 17:29), or, in the context of a developed agricultural society, do they represent a mere subsistence diet? Do they simply designate the normal diet of a recently weaned child?Do they even reflect the mythological diet of Babylonian gods, so suggesting his divinity? To this last suggestion it may be replied that it is doubtful methodology to go outside the OT for an explanation of a phrase if a perfectly good one may be found within it.

7. What does v.15 mean? Is the discrimination dietary or moral? What age is in view? Commentators vary in their suggestions between two or three years and twenty!
8. Verses 16 – 17 appear to relate to historical events that actually take place in the comparatively near future. If this is so, how can the child simply be equated with the Messiah?
9. The chapters that form the context of this passage contain a number of other references to children (7:3; 8:1 – 5, 18; 9:6 – 7; 10:19;11:6, 8). Do any of these passages shed light on the Immanuel prophecy? In particular, is the boy of v.16 identical with the child of v.14, or could he be Shear-Jashub?
10. Why did the LXX translators use the unambiguous word *parthenos* (“virgin”; GK *4221*) to translate <almâ? It is the LXX that is quoted in Matthew 1:23.
11. Can we gain any light from a study of the way Matthew handles other quotations from the OT?

Can we find a solution that does full justice to the language of Isaiah and at the same time to Matthew’s application of the prophecy to Christ?Interpretation 2 (above) and the Hezekiah version of interpretation 1 might seem at first sight to satisfy the former criterion but not the latter. It is doubtful, however, whether they really satisfy even the former. Neither the queen nor Isaiah’s wife was a virgin, and there is no clear OT example of the use of *<almâ* for a married woman. It seems to be used consistently to designate a sexually mature but unmarried woman. The LXX translators took it to mean “virgin” (see Notes).

There are considerable chronological difficulties involved in identifying the child with Hezekiah, although it must be said that this is not the only chronological problem connected with this period of Israel’s history. It seems unlikely that Isaiah’s wife would be designated “the prophetess” in 8:3 and yet be indicated so anonymously here. It seems unlikely too that mothers in general would be referred to by a singular noun with the definite article, despite Calvin’s (in loc.) somewhat uncharacteristic interpretation of “the boy” (v.16) as a general reference.

Moreover, one would normally expect a sign to be more objective and specific than a general return to faith and hope among the people (cf.8:18; 37:30; 38:7, 22; 55:13 is more general but still objective). If v.14 were not followed by vv.15

– 17, we could make a straightforward equation of Immanuel with the Messiah; but this context raises major problems. These verses certainly imply a close historical relationship between the child and the political situation of Isaiah's day.

Before we look at the main interpretations, we must consider the idea that the boy of v.16 is not Immanuel but Shear-Jashub. This was suggested by T. E. Bird ("Who is 'the Boy' in Isaiah 7:16?" *CBQ* 6 [1944]: 435 – 43); it would neatly dispose of many of the problems at one stroke and enable us to interpret vv.13 and 14 as straightforward messianic prediction.Attractive as this suggestion is, it is not a natural way of understanding the passage, because on this view vv.15 and 16 are about two different children. Certainly it is feasible that the prophet could have given a gesture in the direction of his son, but we might expect the author (or redactor) to save the reader confusion by giving some indication of this. Moreover, were it not for Matthew's use of v.14, it is most doubtful if this interpretation would ever have been suggested. Not only so, but the structural parallel with ch. 8, where v.4 clearly relates to the same child as v.3, tells against it strongly. Wegner, 120, n. 259, mentions it but does not discuss it, suggesting that he does not consider it a serious option.

Interpretation 5 above seems the most promising. An unmarried young woman within the royal house will shortly marry and conceive. Her son would be called Immanuel ("God is with us"),probably in ignorance of the prophecy (which may have been given in the presence only of Ahaz) and possibly even as a presumptuous gesture to give the support of a complacent piety to the king's proAssyrian policy. Before the child is old enough to eat the characteristic food of the Promised Land in solid form (and so well before the age of moral discretion), the Assyrians will lay waste the lands of Aram and Israel — which they did in 733 – 732 BC, only a year or two after the prophecy was given (cf.Introduction, p. 436).

On this interpretation, then, the "sign" of the child indicates that the all-sovereign and all-knowing God has the situation completely in hand, and it rebukes the king's lack of faith in him.The instrument of this devastation will be Assyria, the very power Ahaz is courting instead of relying wholly on God. But in fact the events of 733 – 732 BC not only heralded the downfall in 722 of Samaria — the capital city of the northern kingdom that was a large part of the domain of the house of David in its earlier days — but within a generation led to

the devastation of Judah itself (cf. 1:7).

The prophecy is given to the house of David, not simply to Ahaz ("you" in v.14 is plural). In the fullness of time, the messianic child will be born of that house. He is to be a symbol of God's salvation of his people not only from physical foes such as Rezin and Pekah, but also ultimately from sin (cf.Mt 1:21). He represents the final purpose of God in his person as well as his work. For he is, in fullness of meaning, God with us; and his mother was a virgin at the time of her conception and not simply, as in the case of the earlier royal mother, at the time of the prophecy. Matthew's concept of fulfillment is wide-ranging and flexible and embraces several different kinds of correspondence between an OT passage and a NT event, including typology (cf. G.W. Grogan, "The New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament," *TynBul* 18 [1967]: 54 – 59).

It is characteristic of Isaiah to introduce a messianic theme at a somewhat general level before spelling it out in unambiguously messianic terms (cf.comments on 4:2 and 42:1; also the Introduction, pp. 455 – 58). This interpretation, therefore, enables us to see the passage as part of a wider pattern in the book. So, I am contending, Isaiah predicts the coming of a boy who will be a sign from God to his contemporaries and who will foreshadow Christ, in whom the terms of the prophecy — abstracted from its historical situation — will be fulfilled in fullest measure.

In terms of Christ's heavenly origin and his destiny of suffering, death, and burial, as well as his exaltation to the highest place, where he fills the whole universe (Eph 4:9 – 10), the ultimate fulfillment in Christ of the sign given to Ahaz embraces in principle the whole range of options presented to that king (Isa 7:11). It is noteworthy that Matthew's next OT quotation (Mt 2:5 – 6) comes from a prophecy of Isaiah's contemporary, Micah. This contains mysterious hints of preexistence, makes reference to the child's mother (Mic 5:2 – 3), gives Bethlehem as the place of birth, and stresses its insignificance, thus providing a possible spiritual link with the Midian/Gideon theme (cf.comment on 9:4).

18 – 19 The phrase v.17 ends with — "the king of Assyria"— should have struck terror in the heart of Ahaz. There have been few races the equal of the Assyrians for sheer cruelty. An international scene dominated by this mighty and ferocious nation was a sure recipe for sleepless nights in the Fertile Crescent,

especially if there was a prospect of invasion. Yet such is the fate Ahaz is risking! The prophet spells out the consequences in graphic language.

Whistling for insects (v.18) finds mention in a number of classical texts (see Young, in loc.). To create a universe, God had only to speak; to gather his instruments of punishment, he had only to whistle.

In the years that lie ahead, rulers in Judah will look to the valley of the Euphrates and to Egypt for military help, but God warns Ahaz that both areas are to be viewed as sources not of support but of great danger for his people. Lest his reference to bees make Ahaz think the invasion will be somewhat selective and limited in its effect, the prophet pictures them settling in places that are not their normal habitat (v.19). Not since the day of Midian (cf. 9:4) has an invading force been so comprehensively and graphically pictured (cf. Jdg 6:1 – 6).

20 Isaiah passes with ease from one vivid picture to another. The old enemy Egypt recedes from the picture so that the spotlight may be turned on the new and even more terrible oppressor appearing on the northeastern horizon. Shaving, particularly of the beard, inflicted shame on a defeated foe (cf.1Sa 10:4 – 5). The word “hired” seems peculiar until we realize that the Assyrians were well paid — in land and booty — for their trouble. It may also be a glancing allusion to the king’s own inducement to Assyria to come west, though not against him but against his northern enemies (2Ki 16:7 – 8).

21 – 22 In a passage otherwise dark with judgment, this picture incorporates some element of hope for the future.The judgment will devastate the land, but the survivors will find that small resources will yield adequate provisions (cf. 2Ki 4:1 – 7). In this way (cf. Isa 6:13) the purpose of God for his people will continue — if only in a remnant. The fact that “curds and honey” are spoken of in connection with a remnant and with a child who foreshadows the Messiah (see comments on 7:14 – 17) reinforces other evidence of a divinely purposed link between the two in the prophecies of Isaiah (see comments on 4:2 and 42:1).

23 – 25 The devastation of the country — caused by human foes as instruments of the divine judgment — will affect the whole economy of the land and will set civilization back a stage or two. The agricultural economy, symbolized by the vine (v.23), will be replaced by the pastoral, symbolized by

cattle and sheep (v.25), and even by the regime of the hunter, symbolized by the bow and arrow (v.24). O. Kaiser (in loc.) doubts that these verses are genuine utterances of Isaiah: “The inartistic threefold reference to ‘briers and thorns’ does not give the impression of being the work of the prophet,whose language is always so forceful.” This comment is subjective, for just the opposite impression was made on at least one reader! If the king carried away in his imagination a picture of a land covered with briers and thorns, then the message is getting through. Perhaps it is even intended as an emphatic allusion to the threat given in the parable of the vineyard (5:6) if this preceded it chronologically.

NOTES

14 The meaning of עַלְמָה (*ʿalmâ*, “virgin”; GK 6625) has been discussed for centuries. See especially J.Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907); J. G. Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: J. Clarke, 1958); and *ZPEB* , 5:886 – 89. The variant readings of the DSS (“and he” or “and they”)hardly affect the interpretation of the passage.

16 M. R. Adamthwaite (“Isaiah 7:16: Key to the Immanuel Prophecy,” *RTR* 59 [August 2000]: 65 – 83), considering 7:16 as the major problem for viewing 7:14 as straightforward prediction, proposes to render it, “For before the boy will know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land which you are tearing apart will be forsaken of her two kings.” He takes the land to be Israel/Judah and the verse to be predicting the demise of monarchy in both north and south. The verb here קוּץ (*qûṣ*), which he renders “tearing apart,” occurs also in 7:6, but in the Hiphil, not the Qal as here. The latter does not have this sense in the OT, but a cognate Arabic verb does. Adamthwaite argues well for this reading, but it is doubtful whether the evidence is strong enough for the argument to be decisive.

18 For the eschatological phrase “in that day” (cf. vv.20 – 21, 23), see comment on 2:11.

23 The word “shekels” has been inserted by the translators because some word for monetary value is implied, and this seemed the most appropriate to the context.

K. The Sign of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (8:1 – 10)

1 The LORD said to me, "Take a large scroll and write on it with an ordinary pen: Maher Shalal-
Hash-Baz. 2 And I will call in Uriah the priest and Zechariah son of Jeberekiah as reliable
witnesses for me."

3 Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son. And the LORD said to
me, "Name him Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. 4 Before the boy knows how to say 'My father' or 'My
mother,' the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of
Assyria."

5 The LORD spoke to me again:

6 "Because this people has rejected
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah
and rejoices over Rezin
and the son of Remaliah,

7 therefore the Lord is about to bring against them
the mighty floodwaters of the River —
the king of Assyria with all his pomp.
It will overflow all its channels,
run over all its banks

8 and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck.
Its outspread wings will cover the breadth of your land,
O Immanuel!"

9 Raise the war cry, you nations, and be shattered!
Listen, all you distant lands.
Prepare for battle, and be shattered!
Prepare for battle, and be shattered!

10 Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted;
propose your plan, but it will not stand,
for God is with us.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Chapter 8 has the same general background as ch. 7 (see Overview of ch. 7, above). The word *gillāyôn* (v.1) is broad enough to include both a "scroll" (NIV) and a "tablet" (NASB). What is in view is a large writing surface, its form or material unspecified. Its size suggests it is intended for public display, so that it conveys a message and can be cited later as evidence when its prophecy is fulfilled. Its somber message of doom will be interpreted a little later (cf. v.4).

“Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” probably means “quick to plunder, swift to the spoil” (NIV mg.).The Zechariah mentioned here is unknown (the name was extremely common), but Uriah the priest is probably the king’s ally and instrument in apostasy (named in 2Ki 16:11). “Reliable witnesses”need not describe their character so much as their position as people of standing in the community.

3 – 4 Isaiah’s wife is called “the prophetess” (v.3) either because she is his wife or because, as the one who bears children with prophetic names, she becomes involved in the communication of God’s message. It is less likely that she is a prophetess in her own right, as there is no other evidence of this.If, as seems probable, the events of vv.1 – 4 are set out in chronological order, the time involved — including both the pregnancy and the inarticulate babyhood of the child (v.4) — is between eighteen months and two years. This places the inscribed prophecy in 734 BC, for Damascus was occupied and probably Samaria plundered (cf. 2Ki 15:29) by Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 BC.

5 – 8 Here, as he so often did, Isaiah moves from literal statement to vivid picture language, setting contrasting metaphors side by side; then he suddenly changes the second metaphor to another to bring out a further aspect of the full truth. Naaman had contrasted Jordan with Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus (2Ki 5:12) and so had justified his initial rejection of God’s way of giving him deliverance from his leprosy. The nation of Judah is more culpable than Naaman, for he was a Gentile;the contrast Isaiah uses is much more impressive than that used by the Syrian general.

“The gently flowing waters of Shiloah” (v.6) certainly refers to Jerusalem’s means of water supply and probably to the channel that conveyed a slow-moving stream of water from the spring Gihon (cf. comment on 7:3). It is not impossible that the location of Isaiah’s encounter with Ahaz in 7:3 has determined the language here. The challenge to the faith of the king may have been delivered to him at a place that here symbolizes the very confidence in God (cf. Ps 46:4 – 5) that he has rejected. Verse 6 shows in fact that the die is cast and the king and his people are committed to a course of trust in Assyria, not in God.

The NIV’s “rejoices over,” though perhaps a little free, brings out the meaning

of the language used here. The people are whooping with delight at the prospect of the downfall of the two northern kings.If we retain the literal rendering, then, as Motyer suggests (1999, in loc.), “this people” will refer not to Jerusalem but to Samaria, a natural sequence from v.4. Either seems possible, and little depends on a resolution of the issue.

“The River” (v.7) in the OT, without further explanation, is always the Euphrates (cf. Jos 24:15).The metaphor is immediately explained as “the king of Assyria with all his pomp,” the final phrase of which is seen by Young (in loc.) as a genuine Isaianic touch (cf. Isa 10:16; 16:14; 17:3 – 4). Rivers in flood are viewed ambivalently in areas where this natural phenomenon is important. Normal flooding benefits the ground and its produce; abnormal flooding threatens crops and, if extreme, the lives of the people. This exceptional inundation of foreign troops will move inexorably southward, not respecting the border between Israel and Judah.The deluge will almost — but not quite — submerge the whole nation, for above the neck was the head, Judah’s capital, Jerusalem (v.8; cf. 1:7 – 9).Here again, in the midst of a terrifying threat of judgment, the remnant theme reminds us of God’s continuing purpose and grace (cf. also 7:21 – 22).

The metaphor suddenly changes. It seems that the Assyrian army is no longer a river in flood but a predator of the sky (cf. Eze 17; Hos 8:1). But is this really what the prophet means to convey? The outspread wings could belong to the Lord (v.7), so that the image is one of protection (cf. Pss 17:8; 36:791:4; Mt 23:37) and not judgment, amplifying in this way the promise implicit in “reaching up to the neck.” The protection of the capital is the earnest of an ultimate purpose of God for the whole land.So the assurance contained in the name Immanuel (7:14; cf. 8:10) will be justified by events.

9 – 10 The rebellious confidence of v.6b and the confident taunt of vv.9 – 10 occupy different worlds.The former belongs to the world of trust in human alliances and weapons, the latter is the exultant cry of faith in God. Its theme is similar to that of Psalm 2, both passages having messianic overtones. Both generalize rather than specify particular foes, for they state a great principle that is forever true: God’s purpose is proof against all that people or nations — any person or nation — can do. They imply that not only human power (v.9; cf. Ps 9) but also human wisdom (v.10) must fall before the power and wisdom of God (cf. 9:4 – 6; 1Co 1:24 – 27).

NOTES

1 The NIV omits לְ (*lə*), normally translated “for,” before the name of the boy. The significance of this is uncertain, but most commentators consider it to refer to possession.

6 Young (in loc.), who had an eye and an ear for paronomasia, notes it in מָאַס (*māʾas*, “rejected”) and מְשׂוֹשׂ (*məśôś*, “rejoiced”). Isaiah abounds in wordplay of this kind, which may well have been reinforced by voice inflection on the part of the speaker.

9 The word רֵעוּ (*rēʿû*), “Raise the war cry” (NIV) and “Do your worst” (NIV mg.), is difficult in form.Either translation is possible, but there are other options for the translator (cf. Gray, in loc.).

L. Isaiah and His Children as Signs and Wonders (8:11 – 18)

OVERVIEW

Parts of 6:1 – 8:18 are written in the first person singular, and the first person plural occurs in 9:6, so that more than three chapters have an autobiographical atmosphere. In the vision in which he was called (6:9 – 13) and here again, the Lord speaks directly to the prophet about his ministry.

11 The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this
people. He said:
12 "Do not call conspiracy
everything that these people call conspiracy;
do not fear what they fear,
and do not dread it.
13 The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread,
14 and he will be a sanctuary;
but for both houses of Israel he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.
And for the people of Jerusalem he will be
a trap and a snare.
15 Many of them will stumble;
they will fall and be broken,
they will be snared and captured."
16 Bind up the testimony
and seal up the law among my disciples.
17 I will wait for the LORD ,
who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob.
I will put my trust in him.
18 Here am I, and the children the L$_{ORD}$ has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the
LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.

COMMENTARY

11 In some way perhaps distinct from but related to the normal process of prophetic inspiration, the “hand” of the Lord is on the prophet (cf. 1Ki 18:46 [NASB]; 2Ki 3:15; Jer 15:17; Eze 1:3; 3:14). He is under a special divine constraint. He may have been troubled at his increasing isolation from the people whom he is called to address with the word and who persist in rejecting it (cf. 6:9 – 10; 8:8).

12 – 15 A number of conjectural emendations have been suggested to aid our understanding of this passage, but none has commanded general scholarly approval. The text makes excellent sense as it stands and should be approached in its integrity.The NIV margin takes *qešer* in v.12 in the more formal sense of a treaty, while the text understands it in its more usual sense of a conspiracy. But if God is speaking here of a conspiracy, who is under criticism? The commentators are divided, some taking the verse to refer to the political situation in which Ahaz is involved through the threat of the two northern kings, others thinking that it is Isaiah and his disciples (v.16; the verbs in v.12 are plural) who are under criticism from the people. If v.12b balances v.12a, the former interpretation is the more likely.

Isaiah and those who welcome his message (“you” in v.13a is plural; cf. v.18) are to epitomize the response all the people should have made to his message (cf. 7:2), for a deep reverence for God (cf. 29:23) banishes the fear of humankind. *Miqdāš* (“sanctuary”; v.14) comes from the same root as *taqdîšû* (“you are to regard as holy”; v.13). God will himself be a holy place in the midst of his people (cf. Ex 40:34 – 38; Jn 1:14; Rev 21:3).

The prophet has already shown in his language that he regards the division of the kingdom as a tragedy of divine judgment (7:17). Both houses will face further judgment from God because of their attitude in the present crisis, though the mention of Jerusalem suggests he has Judah chiefly in mind. Perhaps he takes the judgment of apostate Israel for granted.

Isaiah uses two analogies to picture this judgment.God is often described in the OT as a “rock” (e.g., Dt 32:4, 15, 18; Pss 18:2; 71:3), normally with implications of shelter and refuge. Here the prophet turns this familiar figure against the people. God the Rock is for his people who trust him, but he is against those who refuse to believe.To them God will be either a boulder over

which a person falls in the darkness or a loose rock at the edge of a ravine. Isaiah has already pictured people under the divine hand of judgment having to become hunters again (7:24); now he speaks of God as the divine Hunter, who uses bird snares and spring traps as foils for his victims.

The NT writers saw the ultimate, divinely-given object of faith to be Christ. Human beings reveal their attitude toward God by their faith in Christ or by their rejection of him, so the NT writers applied this prophecy to him (Mt 21:44; Lk 2:34; Ro 9:33;1Pe 2:8). The importance of this passage for the NT is shown by the fact that so many different NT writers quote or allude to it (see also the comments at Isa 28:16).

It is impossible in English to convey the terrifying force of the seven Hebrew words that constitute v.15. All five of the verbs end with the same long vowel, and four of these open with the same letter and follow one another in unbroken sequence.We may attempt something like the following:“They will stumble, many of them, they will fall, be smashed, snared, seized.” This conveys a little of the sentence’s form but does scant justice to its extreme terseness or to its auditory power.

16 – 17 These verses are often taken to mean that the prophet is turning from public ministry for a while to concentrate on those gathered around him who have accepted his message. In this way God’s face will be hidden in judgment from the mass of the people. In substance this interpretation must be correct, but it should be recognized that “testimony”and “law” (v.16) may well refer to an actual document, the written record of the prophet’s message.O. Kaiser (in loc.) says, “The literal interpretation of a passage must be preferred as long as it can be maintained meaningfully and without artificiality.” This written record has been literally sealed (cf. 29:11;Jer 32:14) — possibly in the presence of witnesses (cf. 8:1 – 2) — so that it cannot be altered.

In view of this, the theory of Carroll and others that the book of Isaiah and other prophetic writings are full of “reinterpretative adjustment of expectations to facts” (R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* [New York: Seabury, 1979], 112) would, if it were true, introduce into the history of Israel’s literature a type of redactor Isaiah would have rejected with horror as no spiritual brother. Incidentally, the DSS have made us familiar with the notion of sealed books.

Hiding the face (v.17) implies judgment (Hab 1:13; cf. Nu 6:25 – 26; Pss 31:16; 80:3, 7, 19).Although persistent rejection of God's word leads to its withdrawal (cf. 1Sa 28:6; Am 8:11 – 12), the prophet, who has welcomed that word and become its channel, reposes confidence in God and in its fulfillment. Presumably his prophetic activity ceases for a while, perhaps until after the overthrow of Rezin and Pekah, which will then confirm the word of God through him.

18 Meanwhile Isaiah and his children, with their symbolic names, are an eloquent visible message from God. Like Immanuel (cf. 7:14), they are signs pointing beyond themselves to the Lord and his word. O. Kaiser suggests that the words "here am I"are a conscious parallel to 6:8. If so, they demonstrate the prophet's conviction that his establishment of a family with symbolic names is an authentic part of the ministry to which God has called him.

REFLECTION

This section of Isaiah's prophecy raises fascinating questions in view of the way the NT writers have used it. First Peter 3:14 – 15 applies Isaiah 8:12 – 13 to Christ in such a way as to show Peter's unqualified acceptance of Christ's deity. The NT teaches that in Christ the sanctuary of God is among his people, for John 1:14 might be translated, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us";and the thought occurs in other NT passages (e.g.,Jn 2:19 – 21; Eph 2:21 – 22). Admittedly there is no clear evidence that this Isaianic verse was in the minds of the NT writers concerned. It is otherwise with the theme of the stone of stumbling, which is quoted or alluded to with reference to Christ in several passages (e.g., Lk 20:18; Ro 9:32 – 33; 1Pe 2:8; for its use in *Nunc Dimittis*, see G. W. Grogan, "The Light and the Stone: A Christological Study in Luke and Isaiah," in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon [Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982], 151 – 67).

In this way Isaiah begins to weave a darker thread into the messianic tapestry of his book, though his color assumes a lighter shade in 28:16, where the Stone is viewed as the object of faith, not of unbelief as it is here. The NT writers have sometimes been accused of importing Christological meaning into passages such

as this where none was intended;but this is hardly warranted when the passage occurs in a context where the messianic king is himself described in divine terms (see 9:6 – 7 and comments there; cf. 7:14).

Young (in loc.) has given a variety of interpretations of 8:16 – 18, and the reader will discover that the application of these verses to Christ in Hebrews 2:13 has been justified in more than one way.Perhaps it is best to view Isaiah and his disciples here as foreshadowing Christ and his church, especially as Christ himself was a prophet and his disciples, who formed the nucleus of the church, were — like those of Isaiah — themselves a remnant of Israel, committed to God's word in him whom others had rejected. Literally, Isaiah's children were, so far as we know, but two; figuratively they included his disciples. This would then make this passage somewhat uniform with 7:14 – 17 as we have interpreted that earlier passage, for in both Christ is presented in type.This would mean, then, that both the child Immanuel and Isaiah and his children constitute the same kind of sign (cf. 7:11, 14; 8:18).

M. The Light and the Child (8:19 – 9:7)

OVERVIEW

There is undoubtedly a close connection between this section and the one preceding it, for the atmosphere of occultic darkness in which it opens is due to humanity's reaction to the hiding of God's face (v.17); and the law and testimony of v.16 recur in v.20. Miscall, 40, comments on the repetitive and impressionistic style of 8:19 – 9:1 and the incantatory sound that cannot be captured in translation. "Isaiah imitates in sound the people as they consult ghosts." Wegner, 140 – 215, deals with 9:1 – 6 in its context and comments on this whole section.

19 When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? 20To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. 21Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. 22 Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness.

9:1 Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan —

2 The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned.

3 You have enlarged the nation
and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest,
as men rejoice
when dividing the plunder.

4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior's boot used in battle
and every garment rolled in blood

will be destined for burning,
will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

COMMENTARY

19 – 20 The law strictly forbade necromancy and other occultic practices (cf. Lev 19:31; 20:6 – 7; Dt 18:9 – 14). It was only when God no longer spoke to him that Saul sought out a witch (1Sa 28:6 – 8), and we have already seen (Isa 3:2) that soothsayers had a tolerated place within the nation of Isaiah's day.The words "whisper and mutter" not only describe the low tones in which the occultic practitioners give their alleged messages but also invite a contrast with the clear and distinct word of prophecy.

Verse 20 introduces the theme of divine light, which is important later in the passage. The true source of light is God's word, for God is himself light (10:17; cf. 1Jn 1:5).The dawning light of God within a human being provides its own evidence in the way God's word governs one's speech, if such a person professes to be the mouthpiece of God.

21 – 22 The Assyrian invasions will bring an acute food shortage (cf. 3:1; 7:23 – 25). Hunger will foster anger, which the Israelites will blame, in part correctly, on their apostate king and, quite wrongly, on their God (v.21; cf. Rev 16:11, 21) — unless of course, as has been suggested, the cursing is by rather than against these referred to. This suggestion would easily fit the reference to God but is more difficult in relation to the king. As there is apparently no help

from higher authority, they look around for some alleviation of their distress (v.22). Seitz (in loc.), alluding to 7:9 and 8:11 – 17, well says, “What is finally established is neither the house of David (Ahaz) nor ‘this people’ but only the word of God as a testimony and a teaching.” The picture of total darkness here goes even beyond that in 5:30 and is comparable to 60:2, in a context that, like this, also promises new light from the God of grace.

The verbs in vv.21 – 22 are in the third person singular, and most translators and commentators take them to mean “one” and so, in effect, “they,”which is possible grammatically. Taking them literally as singulars, however, Hayes and Irvine argue that they describe Pekah’s coup in Israel. In this case, however, we would surely expect him to be named, as the reference to “the son of Remaliah”in 8:6 is too far away from these verses to furnish a clear interpretive context.

9:1 – 2 Verse 1 is numbered 8:23 in the MT, the verses following as 9:1, etc., to the end of ch. 9. Verse 1a clearly links up with the end of ch. 8. Despite the fact that Israel has rejected God’s word through Isaiah (8:11, 17, 19 – 20), God has planned to give his people light again, though its timing is not specified.The humbling of the lands of Zebulun and Naph-tali refers of course to the invasion and annexation of the northern parts of Israel by Tiglath-Pileser III in 733/732 BC (see Introduction, p. 436).

This is made clear when we consider the other geographical references here, for “the way of the sea”almost certainly refers to Sharon or Philistia, while “Galilee of the Gentiles” is probably Gilead and southeastern Syria. The Assyrians carved out three provinces for themselves from these areas. These lands — the first to feel the ominous tread of the warrior’s boot (v.5) — will be the first to see the new and great light God will focus on Israel (cf. 60:1 – 3).Matthew rightly saw the fulfillment of this in the ministry of Jesus in Galilee (Mt 4:15 – 16; cf. Lk 1:79;Jn 8:12; cf. Jn 7:52 with its reference to Galilee).

In v.2, as in several of the succeeding verses, past tenses are used to speak of events that, though future, are certain because they are divinely planned and predicted through an authentic prophet of God.These prophetic perfects serve to present faith’s faculty of imagination with the assurance of things hoped for (cf. Heb 11:1).

3 – 5 At this point the atmosphere of great joy that entered the prophecy at v.1, becoming stronger in v.2, turns into exultant praise as the prophet, anticipating the people's own future joy in their God (cf.ch. 12), turns to address him. National enlargement (v.3; cf. 54:1 – 3) probably presupposes conditions of peace and prosperity under the blessing of God.Both the farmer and the soldier have their times of joy at the climax of their work, and these provide illustrations of the joy that is to come to God's people.For the second of these, compare perhaps 53:12.

"The day of Midian" (v.4, lit. trans.) has been rightly interpreted by the NIV as "the day of Midian's defeat." The Bible is full of pregnant phrases that contain great power of suggestion — and nowhere more so in the OT than in Isaiah. The appropriateness of this phrase can be clearly seen when we recall the historical situation: a vast multitude of the enemy swarming all over the land (Jdg 6:1 – 6;cf. Isa 8:7 – 8); the giving of a sign (Jdg 6:17 – 22;cf. Isa 7:11 – 14); the emphasis on faith in God and not dependence on human beings (Jdg 7; cf. Isa 7:9; 8:12); and, perhaps, the defeat of great forces through apparently insignificant means (three hundred men in the case of Gideon, and the child of promise here). Most of all, of course, the passage promises total redemption by the Lord. Israel will be utterly delivered from the oppressor (cf. 10:5;14:25; esp. 10:24 – 27 and comments there).

Isaiah does not picture the resultant peace abstractly;rather, as is so characteristic of him, he does so in vivid pictures. The boot of the soldier that tramped across Israel's territory and his garment impregnated with the blood of the dead when he lay down to sleep (v.5) will be as obsolete as the sword (2:4).

There is also language here that recalls a greater foe than the Midianites, for, as Motyer points out (1993, in loc.), some of the words recall Egyptian bondage: the "yoke" (Lev 26:13), "burdens" (Ex 1:11; 2:11; 5:4 – 9; 6:6 – 7), "shoulders" (Ps 81:6), and "oppressor" (Ex 3:7; 5:6, 10 – 14). So often in the OT the language of deliverance is the language of the exodus, for this was the great paradigmatic act of salvation (to be replaced ultimately only by the greater redemption at Calvary), and this book of Isaiah itself later promises deliverance in terms reminiscent of the exodus (see 43:14 – 21 and comments there).

6 – 7 The introductory conjunction “for” is important here. All these wonderful events must have an adequate cause. The word “child” is in a position of emphasis. The first person plural “us”suggests a link with 7:14 (see mg. there), and the reader is probably meant to see the connection, for as far as the reader is concerned, Isaiah is acting as a teacher. Just as his theme of the Branch of the Lord (see comment on 4:2) becomes more and more explicitly messianic, so it is with the motif of the child. If the child of 7:14 – 16 (see extended comment there) *typifies* the ultimate divine Christ, the child of these verses *is* that Christ.

It is true that monarchs of the Near East often received exaggerated adulation from their subjects, especially at their enthronement and at subsequent kingdom renewal ceremonies. This is not Mesopotamia, however, but Judah, and Hebrew prophecy was founded on truth, not on flattery. The OT prophets did not hesitate to speak stern words of judgment to their political overlords (cf., e.g., 1Sa 12:7 – 12; 1Ki 21:20 – 24). To speak to monarchs words that could not be taken at their face value was hardly consistent with their calling.

The passage does not necessarily imply that the child is to be a boy-king. In fact, Isaiah may not have regarded that as a blessing (cf. 3:4, 12). The context says much about children, so the child is spoken of in terms of his birth. The tenderness of the child also suggests a comparison with the defeat of Midian’s army by Gideon’s small band of men (Jdg 6 – 7), a comparison reinforced by the dual reference to the shoulder (cf. v.4).

It seems likely that the prophet intends us to understand that the child has four names, not five (cf. v.6, text and mg.). The first two suggest divine wisdom and power (cf. 11:2; 1Co 1:24), for the word translated “wonderful” has overtones of deity and the phrase “Mighty God” must be given its “plain meaning” (Widyapranawa, in loc.) because of its unambiguous application to Israel’s Lord in 10:21.Incidentally, as Murray Harris (*Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Baker 1992], 257, n.7) points out, this could affect our understanding of 7:14, making “God with us” the most likely translation of Immanuel:“If Isaiah 7:1 – 9:7 is considered a closely integrated unit containing the prophetic message to Judah . . . Isaiah 7:14 could be interpreted in the light of 9:6.”

The last two names set forth the ends this child accomplishes by the exercise of these attributes — his fatherly care of his people and the bringing of peace with all of its attendant blessings. In context this quartet of names comes to its climax with “Prince of Peace,” as a glance at vv.4 – 5 makes clear. Its implications are spelled out in v.7.

P. D.Wegner, 140 – 215, deals at some length with the interpretation of the names within the context of his study of the passage as a whole, and he concludes that the names describe Yahweh rather than the child and that they are designed, like Isaiah’s own name (“Yahweh is salvation”) to point beyond the child to God. But the possession of four (or five) names of this type by one child is unique in the Old Testament. Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is only a partial parallel, for none of the four elements of the name is a designation of God.These names, therefore, suggest the uniqueness of the person who bears them.

It is important to note that although the first three names can certainly designate God himself, this is hardly true of the last of them. In fact, as Wegner notes, the noun translated “prince” is always used of human leaders (1Sa 2:8; 1Ki 1:19;Jer 26:11). If this name applies to the king, then surely the other three also must, so that the four names taken together point to one who is both fully divine and truly human. The New Testament surely tells us who he is!

The word “increase” combined with the phrase “his [i.e., David’s] kingdom” suggest that the prophecy has in view much more than a particularly great king of Judah (cf. 1Sa 7:12 – 16).David’s kingdom went well beyond this; its boundary extended far beyond the traditional “Dan to Beersheba” limits of Canaan proper (1Sa 8). The language of this verse — with its picture of peace with righteous ness — is reminiscent of a preDavidic ruler of Jerusalem: Melchizedek (Ge 14:18;cf. Heb 7:2).The harmonious linking of peace and righteousness occurs again, with more detailed exposition, in Isaiah 11:1 – 9.

Since the beginning of ch. 7, the prophet has made amazing disclosures in the name of the Lord.These come to a great climax here. The reader is likely to echo the wondering awe of the mother of this child and cry out, “How will this be?” (Lk 1:34). The prophet anticipated such a question in the closing sentence of this oracle. In fact, both the advent of the Messiah and the blessing of his people, the remnant of Israel, are guaranteed by “the zeal of the LORD Almighty” (cf. 37:32).

NOTES

9:2[1] צַלְמָוֶת (*ṣalmāweṯ*, "the shadow of death"; GK 7516) is rendered "land of darkness" in the NIV margin. It is a composite word and may mean either, depending on its division and derivation. Either is appropriate to the context. See Gray and Young (in loc.).

3[2] The MT and 1QIsa read, "and not increased their joy." The omission of the negative לֹא (*lō'*) without even marginal comment by the NIV reflects the views of most modern commentators, though Hengstenberg and some others have accepted it as genuine. We, with the LXX, should probably omit it as a probable corruption of לוֹ (*lô*, "to him").

6[5] The rendering "Wonderful, Counselor" (NIV mg.), familiar to us from the KJV and the musical phrasing of Handel's *Messiah*, destroys the symmetry but is not impossible. Young (in loc.) has a lengthy note on the translation and interpretation of the names in which he argues that the first three of the four names imply deity.

N. The Judgment of Ephraim (9:8 – 10:4)

OVERVIEW

For comment on the relationship between this passage and 5:25b – 30, see the Note there.Why has an oracle against the northern kingdom been incorporated into the collected prophecies of Isaiah at this point? The threat of Syria and Ephraim against Judah and the associated Assyrian move against the petty states of the Mediterranean seaboard form the background to everything from the start of ch. 7, so such an oracle is not out of place here. Moreover, as some commentators have suggested, the prophecy of the child's universal reign on the throne of David (v.7) would remind the reader of the defection of the northern tribes (cf. 7:17; 11:13).

This oracle stresses God's coming judgment because the northern kingdom is continuing its impenitent rebellion against him. The recurrent refrain here (9:12, 17, 21; 10:4; cf. 5:25 and note there) is reminiscent of Amos 1:3, 6, et al.; 4:6, 8 – 11. To an audience accustomed to the poetic diction of the prophets, it must have sounded like the recurring thunderclap that heralds the fierce storm of judgment. An appropriate date for this oracle is some time between 734 and 722 BC.

8 The LORD has sent a message against Jacob;
it will fall on Israel.
9 All the people will know it —
Ephraim and the inhabitants of Samaria —
who say with pride
and arrogance of heart,
10 "The bricks have fallen down,
but we will rebuild with dressed stone;
the fig trees have been felled,
but we will replace them with cedars."
11 But the LORD has strengthened Rezin's foes against them
and has spurred their enemies on.
12 Arameans from the east and Philistines from the west
have devoured Israel with open mouth.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,

his hand is still upraised.

13 But the people have not returned to him who struck them,
nor have they sought the LORD Almighty.

14 So the LORD will cut off from Israel both head and tail,
both palm branch and reed in a single day;

15 the elders and prominent men are the head,
the prophets who teach lies are the tail.

16 Those who guide this people mislead them,
and those who are guided are led astray.

17 Therefore the LORD will take no pleasure in the young men,
nor will he pity the fatherless and widows,
for everyone is ungodly and wicked,
every mouth speaks vileness.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.

18 Surely wickedness burns like a fire;
it consumes briers and thorns,
it sets the forest thickets ablaze,
so that it rolls upward in a column of smoke.

19 By the wrath of the LORD Almighty
the land will be scorched
and the people will be fuel for the fire;
no one will spare his brother.

20 On the right they will devour,
but still be hungry;
on the left they will eat,
but not be satisfied.
Each will feed on the fl esh of his own offspring:

21 Manasseh will feed on Ephraim, and Ephraim on Manasseh;
together they will turn against Judah.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,
his hand is still upraised.

10:1 Woe to those who make unjust laws,
to those who issue oppressive decrees,

2 to deprive the poor of their rights
and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people,
making widows their prey
and robbing the fatherless.

3 What will you do on the day of reckoning,
when disaster comes from afar?
To whom will you run for help?
Where will you leave your riches?

4 Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives
or fall among the slain.
Yet for all this, his anger is not turned away,

his hand is still upraised.

COMMENTARY

8 – 12 The word of God has great power, as Isaiah himself recognizes (55:10 – 11; cf. Ge 1:3, 6, et al.).Jeremiah called it a hammer breaking the rock in pieces (Jer 23:29); here Isaiah views its painful descent on Israel, using the same word (nāpal,' "fall")as occurs in Daniel 4:28 ("happened"), where it refers to the fulfillment of a word of judgment on a Babylonian king. The people of Israel will come to know it in the terrors of war.

National pride is usually most arrogant in a capital city. Samaria's citizens have refused to take the fall of the northern provinces to the Assyrians (cf. 9:1) as more than a temporary setback in the building of a greater and richer land. In city and garden, the merely adequate that succumbed to judgment through foreign armies will be replaced by the superior. Verse 10 can be taken either literally or figuratively. This mood of defiance may seem creditable, but it expresses determination to thwart God's punitive will, rather like the construction of the Tower of Babel.

The NIV has moved against the stream of modern versions in accepting the reference to "Rezin's foes"(v.11) as an authentic part of the text. The RSV, for instance, removes the personal name and acknowledges the emendation in the margin. The LXX has "adversaries of Zion" instead of "adversaries of Rezin." It is, however, a good canon of textual criticism to accept a harder reading if, despite its difficulty, it still makes sense; and this is the case here. Ephraim, the northern kingdom, may well have discovered that you share not only your ally's resources but also his foes. The NASB also accepts the phrase but understands it somewhat differently, viz., as referring to "adversaries from Rezin," which is also possible.

The word "Arameans" (v.12) is applicable more widely than to the citizens of Aram proper, the country over which Rezin reigned. Here it could designate enemies on his borders. In any case, the specific events referred to in vv.11 – 12 cannot be fully identified. Isaiah is fond of conveying the concept of judgment by using the figure of eating (v.12a; cf.5:14; 9:20). The refrain in v.12b (cf. 9:17, 21; 10:4;5:25) is not purely formal; rather, it presents the fearful thought that the

judgment already described does not exhaust God's wrath against his sinful people.

13 – 17 In 1:2 the prophet spoke of Israel as the "sons" (or "children") of the Lord, and his judgment here is both retributive and restorative in purpose (v.13) when directed against God's people (cf. Hos 2:15; 3:4 – 5).

In an earlier chapter (3:1 – 3) Isaiah used and explained figurative language in relation to the national leadership. It is difficult to see why such explanations should be assigned to a later hand and seen as the work of an unimaginative redactor (see Introduction, pp. 440 – 41; see also Note on v.15). After all, Isaiah is a prophet, and what use is an analogy to a communicator if it may not be understood? Clarity is the first rule of style in any language. Isaiah's two illustrations in v.14 embrace the whole nation, both the honored and the insignificant. Young (in loc.) says, "The leaders were in the government, but the false prophets were not at the head of the people. No leaders were they but, following where the leaders led they simply flattered and fawned, a wagging tail on a dog."

Although the nation is being led astray by its leaders and its false prophets (vv.15 – 16), and the guilt of these is therefore great, nobody is without blame.Even the fatherless and widows (v.17), the socially disadvantaged, must share in the judgment; for the contagion of godlessness has spread through the whole nation. Note the order of the two adjectives "ungodly" and "wicked," suggesting perhaps that the first is the cause of the second (cf. Ro 1:18).

18 – 21 Both the Bible and experience teach that wickedness unchecked spreads like wildfire, and this is precisely what Isaiah indicates here.The reference to a "column of smoke" (v.18) may simply serve to underline the prophet's illustration;alternatively, it may suggest that the acrid stench of wickedness has reached the nostrils of God, in which case it provides a transition to the different use of the same analogy in v.19. Here it is not wickedness but divine wrath that causes the blaze.

In both cases the undergrowth and forest trees represent the people.

The spreading flame of sin is followed in its turn by the fire of God's

judgment, with perhaps a suggestion of the punishment fitting the crime.The words “briers” and “thorns” are favorites with Isaiah, and he uses them together for different purposes (5:6; 7:23 – 25; 10:17; 27:4), but with enough overlapping significance to show that in his mind they stand for the consequences of sin (cf. Ge 3:18).

In vv.11 – 12 the prophet described the attacks made on Israel by her external enemies. From the end of v.19, the more terrible picture of civil war takes over. OT history from the time of the judges reveals many examples of strife within the nation.The tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim should have been particularly close to each other, as both were descendants of the sons of Joseph (Ge 48). The first civil war in Israel, however, was fought between the Gileadites of Manasseh and the men of Ephraim in the days of Jephthah (Jdg 12:1 – 6). Men who would not unite through a common sympathy sometimes joined together to pour out their hatred and jealousy against Judah. Both the earlier and later contexts (i.e., vv.18 – 19, 21b) suggest that this civil strife is to be viewed as a judgment from God.

10:1 – 4 Mauchline (in loc.) fittingly refers to this section as “the accents of Amos,” for the reader is often reminded of Isaiah’s older contemporary here. There is nothing strange about this, for Amos was a southern prophet who addressed the north;and this is the role adopted at this point by Isaiah, for these verses are the conclusion of the oracle against Israel that commenced at 9:8 (see esp. Am 2:6 – 7; 5:11 – 12; 8:4 – 6).

Many critics (e.g., Clements) consider this section part of the series of woes in 5:8 – 23. This is understandable because of the introductory “woe” (cf. 5:8, 11, 18, 20 – 22), but we have already suggested that the true literary and spiritual climax of the sevenfold series is to be found in 6:5 (see comment).This section not only ends with the refrain that recurs throughout this oracle but also tunes in perfectly with the theme of sin and retribution that sounds throughout it. The Amos parallels also support its present position in an oracle against the northern kingdom.

Verse 1 suggests that the ruling class in Israel had devised a legal system that departed in important respects from the Mosaic standard. The phrase “the oppressed of my people” (v.2) expresses the affront to God’s special relationship

with the whole people that this evil legislation constituted. It may well have consisted largely in oppressive land laws (cf. 5:8 – 10). This phrase suggests to the discerning what the rhetorical questions of v.3 clearly imply,the coming of a day of divine reckoning when possession of ill-gotten wealth will make them sure objects of wrath.

The picture of cringing prisoners (v.4) is so true to life, for few can walk erect on their way to prison camp after defeat in war. It is possible, too, that Isaiah suggests they are trying to avoid notice (cf. 2:10, 21) in order to escape death.

The refrain that has occurred at various points in this oracle is truly terrifying in its climactic position (v.4b). If even physical death does not satisfy the fierce anger of this holy God, what dread punishment lies beyond the grave? No such device as this refrain is ever merely formal when it occurs in the Word of God.

NOTES

15[14] Wildberger (in loc.) refers to many commentators as supporting his view that this verse “looks very much like an ancient addition which sought to furnish a detailed listing of those alluded to [in the previous verse].” Motyer (in loc.) is surely correct when he says, “Isaiah often explains his metaphors (cf.8:7). To have observed this stylistic feature would have prevented some commentators from finding glosses in this verse.”

20[19] The NIV (“offspring”) and most English versions and commentators follow the Targum. The MT reading is “arm” (NIV mg.).

O. The Judgment of Assyria (10:5 – 19)

OVERVIEW

The date of this oracle is not easy to determine, but Carchemish (v.9) was not captured till 717 BC, about two years before the death of Ahaz, so the oracle could have been delivered within his reign, as most of the other oracles in chs. 7 – 12 seem to have been. A date in Hezekiah's reign is also possible, of course.

This passage is strongly theological in the sense that a firm conviction of God's sovereignty underlies it (cf. 6:1). It shows his general sovereignty over the rise and fall of world empires — expressed so graphically in 40:23 – 24 — and relates specifically to his use of evil instruments. Isaiah does not deal with the problem this raises for some believers; rather it was Habbakuk who confronted this (see esp. Hab 1:12 – 17). To Isaiah it was enough that God is God (cf. Ro 9:19 – 21) and that he may use any instrument he desires to fulfill his holy purposes.

5 "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger,
in whose hand is the club of my wrath!
6 I send him against a godless nation,
I dispatch him against a people who anger me,
to seize loot and snatch plunder,
and to trample them down like mud in the streets.
7 But this is not what he intends,
this is not what he has in mind;
his purpose is to destroy,
to put an end to many nations.
8 'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says.
9 'Has not Calno fared like Carchemish?
Is not Hamath like Arpad,
and Samaria like Damascus?
10 As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols,
kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria —
11 shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images
as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?' "
12 When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will

punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. 13 For he says:

" 'By the strength of my hand I have done this,
and by my wisdom, because I have understanding.
I removed the boundaries of nations,
I plundered their treasures;
like a mighty one I subdued their kings.

14 As one reaches into a nest,
so my hand reached for the wealth of the nations;
as men gather abandoned eggs,
so I gathered all the countries;
not one flapped a wing,
or opened its mouth to chirp.' "

15 Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it,
or the saw boast against him who uses it?
As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up,
or a club brandish him who is not wood!

16 Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors;
under his pomp a fire will be kindled
like a blazing flame.

17 The Light of Israel will become a fire,
their Holy One a flame;
in a single day it will burn and consume
his thorns and his briers.

18 The splendor of his forests and fertile fields
it will completely destroy,
as when a sick man wastes away.

19 And the remaining trees of his forests will be so few
that a child could write them down.

COMMENTARY

5 – 11 The emotional interjection הוֹי ("woe";v.5), with which v.1 also began (see comment on v.1; also 6:5), induces a mind-set that prepares us for the disclosure of Assyria's judgment in vv.12 – 19.Isaiah tends from time to time to anticipate a God-honoring denouement in this way (see esp. 52:13 and its anticipation of 53:12).

This oracle clearly relates in its theme to the preceding (cf. 9:12, 17, 21; 10:4). God uses instruments to manifest his wrath in the judgment of his people. Assyria is the chief instrument God used in Isaiah's day. Widyapranawa (in loc.)

points out the plenitude of analogies employed in recent chapters in descriptions of Assyria (see 5:27 – 29; 7:18, 20;8:6 – 8; see also the comment 10:15 – 19).

The word “godless” (v.6) must have been as shocking as “Sodom” and “Gomorrah” (1:10) to those who were fastidious, and even excessive, in their observance of religious ritual (1:10 – 17; cf.Mic 6:6 – 7). The lack of a specific reference to Judah may even have led Isaiah’s hearers to think he is speaking of some other nation, until the context puts his meaning beyond doubt. The prophet’s choice of a simile here — “like mud” — may be due to his conviction that Judah has become spiritually and morally worthless (cf. Mt 5:13).

God has given us a glimpse of his mind; now we see the mind of Assyria. The two are at one only as to the actual acts of war, not their ultimate purpose. Assyria and its boastful kings certainly did not intend serving the punitive ends of Israel’s God; rather, they sought conquest and territorial expansion for their own glory (v.7; cf. 45:4 – 5).Verses 8 – 11 anticipate v.12, with its reference to the Assyrian king, though the cities mentioned in v.9 were actually overcome by a series of Assyrian monarchs, not just one. Calno and Arpad (v.9), in northern Syria, were taken in 738 BC, Damascus in 732, Samaria in 722, Hamath on the Orontes in 720, and the ancient Hittite city of Carchemish on the upper Euphrates in 717.

The king of Assyria’s boastful rhetoric (vv.10 – 11) must have seemed quite irrefutable to the people of his day. In fact, Samaria could not withstand the might of his armies any more than the pagan cities, and Jerusalem ruled a smaller kingdom. It was sad but true that neither Israel nor Judah was without idols (cf. 2:8, 20). What the Assyrian did not realize was the special purpose of God for his people, especially his determination to deliver Jerusalem.The gods of the pagans were mere vanities (cf., e.g.,46:5 – 13), but Yahweh is the living God (37:4).

12 This verse, with its straightforward prose, sums up the theology of this great oracle. God has two ends to fulfill in relation to Assyria. He will punish one nation through her and punish her through another, though the latter nation is not specified or even hinted at here.The phrase “his work” stands in strong contrast to the expression “my hand” in v.10.This may be God’s “strange work” (cf. 28:21 – 22), but it is his work nevertheless; and Assyria is his agent for its

accomplishment. The reference to Mount Zion calls to mind the temple (cf. 2:2; 4:5) and the evidence of religious apostasy it revealed in the time of Ahaz (cf. 2Ki 16).

All sin comes under God's judgment, and the arrogance of his unwitting instruments is no exception. Isaiah's special stress on the holiness and majesty of God made it inevitable that he would launch constant attacks on human pride (cf., e.g., 2:11 – 17;3:16 – 4:1; 5:15 – 16; 9:9 – 10). Even the pagan Greeks recognized that pride is an affront to deity.

13 – 14 Clements (in loc.) and other commentators have pointed out that the prophet must have been familiar with the style of Assyrian victory inscriptions, for the words here are in that tradition. These inscriptions had only one purpose — the glorification of the monarch. Isaiah has a tendency to introduce direct speech, not only — as so often in the prophets — the words of God, but also those of human beings (cf.2:3; 3:6 – 7; 4:1; 5:19; 8:4, 19; 10:8).

Strength and wisdom (v.13) are widely recognized as vital qualities for anyone in authority, especially for a king. The messianic king has them through the endowment of God's Spirit (11:2; cf.9:6), but the Assyrian monarch boasts of them as his own. The removal of national boundaries and the consequent mixing of peoples was one of the dis-tinctives of Assyrian policy in the lands they conquered (cf. 2Ki 17:6, 24). The picture of absolute power and total helplessness that we see in v.14 may have been somewhat exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the might and ferocity of the Assyrians won them many overwhelming victories.

15 – 19 After the illustration of the nest (v.14), Isaiah moves swiftly from one image to another, almost every word serving the needs of some simile or metaphor. First he develops the thought of v.5, where Assyria is pictured as an instrument of authoritarian chastisement. In v.15 it is not only this but also a tool in the hand of the forester to be used for felling trees (cf. vv.33 – 34). In a manner to become familiar later (e.g., in 44:9 – 20; 45:9 – 13;46:1 – 2), Isaiah uses logic to expose and ridicule human sin. The picture of a tool or an instrument breaking loose from the control of its master and exulting in its liberty is familiar to us from a poem by Goethe, the music of Dokas, and the art of Disney, but the ax here is held by no "Sorcerer's Apprentice" but by the Lord

Almighty (v.16).

Inspiration again shakes the kaleidoscope of the prophet's imagination, and two new pictures come into view to convey God's judgment on the pride of his punitive instruments (vv. 16 – 17). The image of a sick man gradually wasting away under a consumptive disease (see Note on v.16) and that of vegetation and forest trees being destroyed by fire present different aspects of the demise of Assyria.Her enemies wore down her resistance over a period of some years, but the decisive moment ("a single day"; v.17) came with the downfall of her capital, Nineveh, which is celebrated as an act of God in the prophecy of Nahum.

The picture of the destroying fire contains two notable features. The first is Isaiah's use of the word kāḇôḏ(rendered "pomp" in v.16 and "splendor" in v.18). God's own unique kāḇôḏ("glory" in 6:3) has been revealed to Isaiah. No one else may boast of his own splendor in the light of that.The second important feature is particularly striking.The prophet does not tell us simply that the Lord will light the fire of judgment; instead, he declares, "the Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame" (v.17).

This is a profound spiritual insight of the same order as that of the Rock of salvation becoming the Stone of stumbling (see comment on 8:12 – 15).God remains eternally the same, but human beings may experience now one consequence of a particular divine attribute, now another. He is the Light of his people (cf. Ps 27:1), and one day he will be the source of light for all the nations (cf. Isa 2:1 – 5;60:1 – 3); but here that holy Light is felt by an arrogant conqueror as a fire of judgment. We need to remember that at this time a torch was an agent of both light and heat. P. Miscall ("Isaiah: Dreams and Nightmares, Fantasy and Horror," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 8 [1995]: 153) says, "God's bounty overflows in a surfeit of light (30:26) . . . .Horror is the opposite . . . . He burns and devours his thorns and briars in a single day."

Yet even here there is the slightest suggestion of hope, so characteristic of Isaiah's prophecies (cf.6:13; 7:3 mg.; 8:8). God is planning a devastating judgment for Assyria but amazingly — for this is not Israel but a Gentile nation — not total obliteration.If Israel is to be left a remnant for the fulfillment of God's purposes for her, so too is Assyria! In this way we are prepared for the astounding revelation given in 19:23 – 25. Having said this, we must also say

that the emphasis in v.19 is still on the judgment.

NOTES

13 The RSV and NEB render “like a bull” instead of “like a mighty one.” אַבִּיר (*ʾabbîr*) may mean either, and either makes good sense in the context. In a passage filled with illustrative language, the simile of a bull would be very much in place.

16 מִשְׁמָן (*miŝmān*, “sturdy warriors”) literally means “fatness” (cf. 17:4). If it refers to the fat parts of the body rather than to stout warriors, this means that the same image is found in vv.16 and 18 (cf. Gray and Wildberger, in loc.).

P. The Deliverance of the Lord's Remnant (10:20 – 34)

20 In that day the remnant of Israel,
the survivors of the house of Jacob,
will no longer rely on him
who struck them down
but will truly rely on the LORD,
the Holy One of Israel.
21 A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob
will return to the Mighty God.
22 Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea,
only a remnant will return.
Destruction has been decreed,
overwhelming and righteous.
23 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, will carry out
the destruction decreed upon the whole land.
24 Therefore, this is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:
"O my people who live in Zion,
do not be afraid of the Assyrians,
who beat you with a rod
and lift up a club against you, as Egypt did.
25 Very soon my anger against you will end
and my wrath will be directed to their destruction."
26 The LORD Almighty will lash them with a whip,
as when he struck down Midian at the rock of Oreb;
and he will raise his staff over the waters,
as he did in Egypt.
27 In that day their burden will be lifted from your shoulders,
their yoke from your neck;
the yoke will be broken
because you have grown so fat.
28 They enter Aiath;
they pass through Migron;
they store supplies at Micmash.
29 They go over the pass, and say,
"We will camp overnight at Geba."
Ramah trembles;
Gibeah of Saul fl ees.
30 Cry out, O Daughter of Gallim!
Listen, O Laishah!
Poor Anathoth!
31 Madmenah is in flight;
the people of Gebim take cover.

32 This day they will halt at Nob;
they will shake their fist
at the mount of the Daughter of Zion,
at the hill of Jerusalem.
33 See, the Lord, the LORD Almighty,
will lop off the boughs with great power.
The lofty trees will be felled,
the tall ones will be brought low.
34 He will cut down the forest thickets with an ax;
Lebanon will fall before the Mighty One.

COMMENTARY

20 – 23 The eschatological phrase "in that day"(v.20; see comment on 2:11) introduces some verses dominated by the doctrine of the remnant.The phrase also connects these verses with the previous passage. Clements (in loc.) describes them as a kind of midrash (i.e., commentary) on the name Shear-Jashub in 7:3. This is an appropriate description, provided we add that it is not simply midrash but includes actual events that correspond to the symbolic name of Isaiah's son, as God's fulfillment complements his promise. In fact, these verses present a plenitude of allusion to earlier passages of Scripture, both from Isaiah and elsewhere, almost after the fashion of the book of the Revelation.

The words "him who struck them down" (v.20) are exactly the same in the Hebrew *(makkēhû)* as the phrase in 9:13[12], but here they denote the human instrument of God's wrath rather than God himself (cf. v.5). How incredible that they should put their trust — as Ahaz had done (cf. 2Ki 16:7 – 9) — in a nation whose known character could guarantee nothing but rapine and almost inhuman cruelty and refuse to rely on the God who had lavished blessing on them throughout their history! So irrational is humanity's unbelief.

Verse 21 opens with the phrase *šᵉʾār yāšûb*("a remnant will return"; see NIV mg.), which is identical with the name of Isaiah's son (Shear-Jashub, 7:3).The emphasis in this verse (as distinct from v.22)is positive. God will not utterly destroy his people (cf. also 6:13). There are in fact two symbolic names in the verse, for "Mighty God" is evocative of the description of the messianic king in 9:6. Young reminds us of another eighth-century prophet, Hosea, who wrote, "Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their

king” (Hos 3:5). The NT doctrine of the incarnation enables us to understand how relying on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, can be equated with returning to the messianic king, whose name is “Mighty God.” Here, then, the two great Isaianic doctrines of the remnant and the Messiah come together.

Verse 22 links the remnant doctrine with what it appeared to negate but which in God’s purpose it actually guarantees — the promise to the patriarchs that their seed would be many (cf. Ge 22:17; 32:12).The reader has been prepared for this reminder of the promise by the name Jacob in vv.20 – 21. The promise, true as it was, sometimes induced complacency (cf. Mt 3:9 – 10; Jn 8:33 – 40), for Satan takes even the Scriptures God gave for human blessing and interprets them to serve his purposes of error and damnation (cf. Mt 4:6; 2Pe 3:15 – 16).

Verses 22b – 23 are particularly somber in their tone. God is described by titles of power (cf. comment on 1:24). This fact — along with the reiterated word “decreed” — makes the threatened destruction truly terrifying, for it is sovereign and irrevocable. There is perhaps a hint of the Mesopotamian origin of the instrument to be used in the word translated “overwhelming,” for this uses the same Hebrew verb translated in 8:8 as “swirling over.” The great Euphrates produced one overwhelming flood of judgment through the Assyrians, who overcame Israel, and another through the Babylonians, who brought Judah’s kingdom to its end.These nations were wicked (cf. 10:12; 14:4 – 6), but God used them as instruments of his righteous purpose of judgment.

Verses 22 and 23 are cited by Paul in Romans 9:27 – 28 (see also his quotation of Isa 1:9 in Ro 9:29) in his great theological treatment of God’s purpose for Israel and its relationship to the way its representatives reacted to the gospel of Christ in his day.

24 – 27 The emphasis on God’s power continues as the prophet uses the same divine titles as in v.23.This time, however, his power is directed to the salvation rather than to the judgment of his people.The section these titles introduce is just as full of allusions to other passages — both within and outside Isaiah — as vv.20 – 23. Other parts of the country may feel the tread of Assyria’s fearful host (v.24;be secure (cf. Ps 46). So often in Isaiah’s prophecy Jerusalem/Zion, as the political and religious heart of the country, represents God’s continuing purpose for his people.

The references to the rod, the club, and the yoke remind us of 9:4 – 7, with its promises of defeat for the strong enemy and of the benign government of the Child born to be King. The King is not here, but the deliverance is. Historical parallels are drawn not only with the deliverance from Egypt — an earnest of the new exodus theme that will have a place of importance later in the book — but also with the vanquishing of Midian (cf. 9:4).The death of the two Midianite leaders at Oreb (cf. Jdg 7:25) was perhaps the decisive moment in the later stages of the battle, for an army in flight without leaders cannot regroup and counterattack. On both occasions Israel was greatly outnumbered, but her trust in God was shown by him to be well founded. So would it again!

Verse 25 may be compared with 40:1 – 2. God's wrath against his people is real; but because they are his people, the foreign scourge — whether Assyria, as here, or Babylon later — will be used against them only for a limited time. God will call a halt and will then punish his unwitting instrument for its sin (cf. 10:12 – 19).

Once again we encounter one of Isaiah's favorite figures, the bearing of a heavy burden (v.27; see comments at 1:4, 14). Israel is like a slave carrying a heavy burden or a domestic animal yoked and laden. So there will be an Assyrian captivity, but it will be ended by divine action. "The yoke will be broken because you have grown so fat" may picture Israel as an animal so large that the yoke will not fit it. So she cannot be fully subdued by the enemy (see Notes).

28 – 32 The processes by which God gave the OT prophets their messages are known to us only in part, but we are aware that the vision is one important medium (see comment on 1:1). The superbly dramatic appeal to the imagination in these verses suggests a visionary provenance. Perhaps the prophet in his imagination is standing on the city walls looking northward and seeing the inexorable advance of the Assyrian army through places within and just beyond his normal range of sight. For sheer drama these verses have little to equal them in the prophets, except in Nahum. Clements (in loc.) comments, "*Geba* was barely six miles from Jerusalem, and for an attacking force to pitch camp there would indicate complete mastery of the tactical situation, together with confidence that the defenders in Jerusalem were demoralised and powerless"

(emphasis his).Nob was much closer still.

Isaiah 36:2 tells us that the Assyrian army actually came to Jerusalem from Lachish, from almost exactly the opposite direction; therefore, Alexander, Young, and others see the description here simply as an indication that the Assyrian advance through the environs of the capital would be purposeful and swift without necessarily implying that they would pass through every place mentioned. This approach to the passage is not unacceptable, but it may be that some tactical situation arose that caused the Assyrian army to make a circuit around the city from Lach-ish, finally approaching it from the north. The history of warfare contains many similar examples.

Another possibility is that Isaiah's words actually apply to an advance against Jerusalem by Sargon during the period of Philistine unrest more than a decade earlier. However, insufficient detailed military information exists to make it much more than speculation (see Clements, in loc.).

33 – 34 After the advance, the counterattack!The Hebrew word  (“see”) is often treated as though it is little more than a formal link, much likea simple conjunction. In fact, it is an exhortation to visualize and to take special note. It is well placed here. The divine title of power “Yahweh  ”(“the LORD Almighty”; v.33), so much favored by this prophet, occurs no fewer than five times in this chapter from v.16 onward. This is striking in a section of the prophecy where the mighty and ferocious Assyrian enemy is never far from sight, for it underlines the infinite superiority of the true God over even the greatest of nations.

The Assyrian hosts appear like an advancing forest, making the reader wonder whether this was the source for Shakespeare of the movement of Birnham forest toward Dunsinane in *Macbeth* (act 5, sc. 3). Suddenly the divine Forester begins to attack undergrowth, boughs, whole trees, and even the mighty cedars of Lebanon (v.34; cf. 2:12 – 18, esp. v.13). The pride of Assyria (cf. v.13) causes it to become an example of the general principle laid down by God in ch. 2, viz., men of pride are always riding for a fall.

27 The RSV, which assumes that the dramatic advance of the Assyrian army commences in v.27b, translates “He has gone up from Rimmon” instead of

“because you have grown so fat.” This is just one of a number of suggested emendations, and the LXX reads “his yoke will be broken off your shoulder”; but the MT makes sense as it stands and is supported by lQIsa. The interpretation given in the commentary is supported by Kimchi, Delitzsch, and Oswalt (in loc.).

28 – 32 For detailed identification of the place names, see *ZPEB* under the various names, also Clements and Young (both in loc.). Aiath is possibly a longer form of Ai.Wildberger (in loc.) points out that although the list proceeds from north to south it does not do so in a straight line and so concludes, probably correctly, that the passage does not so much describe the route as list the places where the people would have been thrown into a dreadful panic.

יִפְקֹד כֵּלָיו (*yipqōd kēlāyw*,“they store supplies”; v.28) could be translated “he examines his weapons,”and this is perhaps even more in keeping with the vigorous dramatic style of these verses. Clements (in loc.), making this suggestion, compares Genesis 27:3; Judges 18:11, 16 for this rendering of the noun.

In v.29, lQIsa has “he goes over the pass,” with no alteration of the general sense.

Q. The Davidic King and His Benign Reign (11:1 – 9)

OVERVIEW

The messianic theme reappears, having been out of sight since 9:7; and it is taken up just at the point where it was left before, for the Davidic throne is implied in the reference to Jesse, David's father, and the effective zeal of the Lord Almighty in the richly empowering Spirit of the Lord. Motyer (1993, inloc.) comments, "Undated hope is a living, ever-present assurance for God's people, and it is at this point that the passage speaks as much to the church today as [his people] in Isaiah's time." Wegner, 218 – 74, discusses the passage and its messianic bearing in detail.

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him —
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD —
3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteous ness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the hole of the cobra,
and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy

on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3a Once more the appropriateness of this book's arrangement makes itself felt. At the end of ch. 10, the ax of divine judgment fell on the forest-like army of Assyria; at the opening of ch. 11 the purpose of divine grace is seen in the growth of a shoot from the stump of Jesse (v.1). Compare Genesis 11, where under judgment the movement of the nations away from Babel is succeeded by the migration of Abraham's family from Ur to Haran at the gracious call of God (cf. Ac 7:2).

The reduction of the Davidic dynasty to a mere stump is a true metaphor for its condition when Christ was born; for, though still in existence, it had been without royal power for nearly six hundred years. The reference to Jesse — who was, of course, never king — rather than to David, who was, may point to the total absence of royal dignity in the house of David when the Messiah would come; but there was still life in the house, for God's purpose (cf. 1Sa 7:16) had not been set aside (cf. Eze 21:27).Calvin thought the reference to Jesse was intended to cut the house of David down to size. Others, however (e.g., Motyer), think it suggests that the Messiah would have more resemblance to godly David than to the kings who followed him, so many of whom were apostate. The Branch (see comment on 4:2; 6:13) is now fully messianic. God's people need more than the promise of fertile land or of continued national life through the remnant.They need the very incarnation of God's life in the Messiah.

The Assyrian monarch boasted of his own power and wisdom (10:8 – 14; cf. 14:12 – 14), but the supreme King will be equipped for his work by the Spirit of the Lord (v.2). There are links between this passage and 9:6, especially in the expression "the Spirit of counsel and of power." The earlier passage showed the King to be divine while this one exhibits his dependence, a combination that requires the incarnation for its explanation. Solomon, Jesse's grandson, who may have seemed the fulfillment of the hope of "great David's greater son,"was endowed with wisdom by God, but he fell far short of the divine ideal expressed in Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20, because he did not fear the Lord with an undivided

heart (cf. 1Ki 11:1 – 13).The twofold reference to the fear of the Lord here (vv.2 – 3a) underlines its importance.

The basic description “the Spirit of the LORD ”followed by three pairs of qualities attributed to the Spirit may be intended to add up to a symbolical seven (compare and contrast the seven “woes”of 5:8, 11, 18, 20 – 22; 6:5). If so, the symbolism would suggest that the Messiah was to be perfectly endowed by the Spirit with everything requisite to his kingly task (cf. Rev 5:6). Oswalt (in loc.) follows G. A. Smith in commenting on the intellectual qualities attributed here to the work of the Spirit:“[Smith] goes on to say that our age needs to recapture some of that intellectual emphasis. The passing of a century has not altered the validity of Smith’s concern. If anything, that recovery is even more necessary today.”

3b – 5 The act of pronouncing judgment in the court is often treated in the OT as the acid test of a wise and incorruptible use of authority (cf., e.g., 5:21 – 23; Ps 72:1 – 4). Verse 3b does not mean that right judgment ignores evidence available to the senses but rather that it requires inner qualities of character (cf. Jn 2:25; 7:24). The word “judgment” has an ominous ring to us; but when used of the poor it is almost a synonym for salvation (Pss 72:2; 82:2 – 4). Where there is corruption in the law courts, it is the poor who long for a righteous judge.

The reiterated word “earth” (*ʾereṣ*, v.4) also signifies “land.” The rule of the messianic king is to be over Israel but also over the whole world (9:7; cf.11:10), so it is not easy to tell whether here and in v.9 the narrower or wider sense is intended; either is appropriate. Whichever is meant, we can be sure that the principles by which he rules the world will not differ from those operative in the more limited sphere.

In the divine economy, the word is active and powerful (cf. Ge 1:3; Isa 55:10 – 11), and the Messiah’s word of judgment will be utterly effective (cf. Jn 12:48). He judges as “the Word of God”(Rev 19:13 – 15). This testifies to his great power (cf. v.2), for unlike many a monarch he is well able to execute the judgments he pronounces. In him word and consequent action are virtually one.

In the Near Eastern dress styles, the belt or sash (v.5) was the garment that gave stability to the whole ensemble; and to “gird the loins” (KJV; 1Ki 18:46;

2Ki 4:29; 1Pe 1:13) was to prepare for work.The Messiah would be prepared in character for his work of judgment.

6 – 9 Biblical eschatology may involve more than the simple restoration of conditions as they were in the unfallen world, but it certainly includes this (cf.Ge 1:26 – 28; Ps 8; 1Co 15:25 – 28; Heb 2:5 – 9). It is not now Adam who is to be king of the world but the Second Man, the messianic King. In his reign nature will be at peace with itself and with human kings.

There seems no reason to doubt that this is to be understood literally. The whole subject raises fascinating ecological questions beyond the scope of this commentary to discuss.We know something of the effects of the fall on human beings and on plant life (Ge 3:17 – 19); and we cannot doubt that animal life, bound with the human race and the plants in the unity of a worldwide ecosystem, must have been affected also.

The normal prey of the fierce predators need have no fear of them under the Messiah's reign.Young (in loc.) points out that the calf is the most vulnerable to the lion and the fatted yearling the most desirable (v.6); yet the prophecy puts them together. The predators will so respect the lordship of human beings given to them before the fall (Ge 1:28) that even the little child will command respect and, perhaps, will act responsibly and with benevolence toward the predators like a shepherd leading his flock.

The ecological issues are touched on in v.7, with its implied reference to Genesis 1:30. Any adaptation of the ecosystem involved will presumably be a restoration of the world to its unfallen condition.Isaiah 65:25 repeats the thought and some of the language of this passage (see comment there).

Genesis 3 presents the serpent as the first enemy of human beings within the animal kingdom. In the light of this fact, v.8 moves even beyond vv.6 – 7 by suggesting the removal of the divine curse pronounced at the fall.The instinct of self-preservation is deep in every creature, so this profound scene exhibits peace, trust, and harmony.

As a result of the taming of nature, normally "red in tooth and claw," Mount Zion, the holy mountain of God (v.9), will know a far-reaching peace and

security that reminds us of other such promises in 4:5 – 6. The breadth of the Messiah's reign (cf.9:7) means, however, that the peace and security of Jerusalem will be a microcosm of a much wider blessing.Whatever the meaning of ,אֶרֶץ ("earth") in v.4 (see comment), it almost certainly refers to the whole world in v.9 (cf. Ro 8:19 – 22) because of the references to the sea here and to the nations in v.10.

The conjunction "for" (*kî*, v.9) is theologically important because it states the cause of this peace.The restoration of human beings to God implied in "the knowledge of God" reverses the alienation introduced by the fall, so making possible the restoration of their environment to its unfallen condition. For a discussion of the wider implications of the interpretation of this passage, see the Introduction, pp. 450 – 52.

NOTE

1 גֵּזַע (*gezaʿ*, "stump") normally refers to the stump of a felled tree (cf. Job 14:8), but contrast Isaiah 40:24, where it designates a newly planted tree. The parallel here with שָׁרָשָׁיו (*šārāšāyw*, "his roots") tends to support the normal sense.

יִפְרֶה (*yipreh*, "will bear fruit") follows the MT, which is supported by 1QIsa. The LXX's (B) reading, ἀναβήσεται (*anabēsetai*), implies a reading of יִפְרָה (*yiprâ*, "will sprout"). Either makes good sense, the former in terms of identical parallelism and the latter of synthetic.

R. The Nation and the Nations (11:10 – 16)

10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him,
and his place of rest will be glorious. 11 In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time
to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper
Egypt, from Cush, from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea.

12 He will raise a banner for the nations
and gather the exiles of Israel;
he will assemble the scattered people of Judah
from the four quarters of the earth.

13 Ephraim's jealousy will vanish,
and Judah's enemies will be cut off;
Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah,
nor Judah hostile toward Ephraim.

14 They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west;
together they will plunder the people to the east.
They will lay hands on Edom and Moab,
and the Ammonites will be subject to them.

15 The LORD will dry up
the gulf of the Egyptian sea;
with a scorching wind he will sweep his hand
over the Euphrates River.
He will break it up into seven streams
so that men can cross over in sandals.

16 There will be a highway for the remnant of his people
that is left from Assyria,
as there was for Israel
when they came up from Egypt.

COMMENTARY

10 – 11 These verses perform a transitional function, for they are linked with vv.1 – 9 by the word שֹׁרֶשׁ(“root”) and with v.12 by נֵס (“banner”). In 5:26 God raised a banner to summon a nation as his instrument of judgment on his people, while here the messianic king has an attractive power that brings the peoples of the world together, just as in 60:1 – 3 the Lord himself attracts the nations in darkness to his marvelous light. In 2:1 – 4 it was the word of God that had drawing power; here it is the Christ.

The eschatological phrase “in that day” (v.10; see Note at 2:11), occurring in both verses, relates this messianic teaching to the end times. Like most of the OT writers, Isaiah has a lively sense of the special importance of the exodus from Egypt, when God stretched out his hand to deliver his people.Isaiah looks forward to a time when an event will occur comparable with it in redemptive significance (v.11). This will also contrast with the exodus, for those who return will be the remnant of a larger people, while it was the greatly enlarged family of Jacob that left Egypt under Moses. The events will also differ because this time the peoplewill not move together as a body from one point of departure but will come together from many lands and various points of the compass. Instead of going forth under a great leader, they will come together seeking a greater Leader still.

The places referred to, with one exception, are located at or near the two great river systems that have acted as mothers of civilization in the Near East: the Tigris – Euphrates and the Nile. The addition of the phrase “the islands of the sea” is surprising. The word “island” (*ʾî*, plural *ʾiyîm*) occurs frequently in Isaiah 40 – 66 and appears to designate the Mediterranean maritime areas. The only reference to a dispersion of Jews in this area is in Joel 3:6; and it is by no means agreed that Joel prophesied before Isaiah. We do find a considerable western dispersion in NT times, however, as also today, and this is anticipated here by the Holy Spirit.

12 – 14 After a brief prose interlude (vv.10 – 11), the exalted poetry the prophet normally uses resumes. Inventories — whether of geographical areas, as here, or of items of feminine attire, as in 3:18 – 23 — do not generally lend themselves to poetry. Isaiah first summarizes the thought of the two prose verses in poetic form, making it clear that by “his people” (v.11) he has Judah primarily in mind, even though “Assyria” may have suggested an application also to Ephraim. The Davidic dynasty was associated exclusively with Judah for many centuries, ever since the division of the kingdom (cf. 7:17). The reference to Assyria finds its explanation, however, in v.13.There will be a reclamation of northern Israelites as well, and the once-divided nation will be united. It had been torn apart through the sin of a son of David (1Ki 11:11);it will be reunited under David’s greater Son.

David’s rule had extended well beyond the territory of the twelve tribes (1Sa 8). Ephraim and Judah will someday make common cause against the Philistines

(v.14) by taking advantage of their location in the hill country to move down the slopes of the Shephelah, west of the Judean mountains, against the Philistines on the coastal plain.The three neighboring nations to the east and southeast will come under subjection again to Judah. Psalm 2 may well represent the futility of the rebellion of these small nations — as representative of world rebellion — against Judah. This rebellion will now be over.

15 – 16 The nations mentioned in v.14 were small and insignificant when compared with the great militarist regimes of Egypt and Mesopotamia. God's hand of power will be stretched forth for his people in both areas. He acted once before at the Red Sea and will do so again for the same liberating purpose (v.15). He had used a great wind (Ex 14:21) at the exodus; he will do so again to bring the people back from Mesopotamia, for the wind will produce there a delta not unlike that at the mouth of the Nile. The highway promised (v.16) may contain an allusion to Exodus 14:26 – 29, the dry road through the Red Sea; or it may mean that God will bring them back safely across the desert that stretched between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean seaboard (cf. 35:8).

NOTES

11 צֹרְרִי (*ṣōrᵉrî*, "Pathros," i.e., "Upper Egypt") has been identified as that part of Egypt that lies roughly south of Memphis and north of Aswan. It is literally "the southern land." Cush, which occurs also in 18:1, is Ethiopia and its adjoining lands and lies just south of Pathros. Elam lies north of the western end of the Persian Gulf. Babylonia is properly "Shinar" (NIV mg.), the Babylonian heartland lying in the southeastern part of the Tigris – Euphrates valley. Hamath is a Syrian city and small kingdom on the Orontes.

13 צֹרְרִי (*ṣōrᵉrî*,"enemies") can also be rendered by the abstract word "hostility" (NIV mg.). The translation "enemies" means that "jealousy" must be understood as having an objective relationship to "Ephraim's" to preserve the parallelism, whereas the marginal reading requires it to be understood subjectively.

15 In the OT, "the River" (NIV mg.) is always the Euphrates. The verse has in view a division of the waters different from that of the Red Sea at the exodus or of the Jordan at the entry into Canaan. There will be seven shallow streams, easy

to ford, rather than one deep one. The NIV's "dry up" is based on a slight, unnecessary textual emendation. The NASB's "utterly destroy" is to be preferred.

S. A Song of Joyous Praise (12:1 – 6)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 1 – 12 focuses attention on Judah and Jerusalem. Chapter 12 forms a fitting climax and close for this whole section. Wegner, 88, suggests that 5:1 – 7 (a song of judgment) and 12:1 – 6 (a song of thanksgiving) form a kind of envelope of songs enclosing what falls between them.The chapters that precede ch. 12 say much about the sins of God's people, warning them of the divine wrath provoked by these sins and the divine judgment that is sure to follow. They also record God's declaration of forgiving grace for the penitent, the challenge to believe, and predictions of a glorious future for God's people. God's great name will be exalted, and his king will reign. Nothing could be more appropriate than a heartfelt psalm of praise to round off this section of the prophecy.

1 In that day you will say:
"I will praise you, O LORD .
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.
2 Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD , is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation."
3 With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.
4 In that day you will say:
"Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.
5 Sing to the LORD , for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.
6 Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 In ch. 11 the expression “in that day” introduced two verses (vv.10 – 11) that focused on the Messiah and the remnant and thus on the great final purposes of God for his people. This psalm of praise anticipates the feelings of his people when that great day arrives.The eschatological nature of this expression (see Note at 2:11), as well as the relationship of ch. 12 to the verses that precede it, further affirm our position that its application cannot be restricted to the return from Babylon but must embrace the final acts in the drama of God’s dealings with his people.

The opening words of v.1 and v.4 are identical in English; but, in fact, “you” in v.1 is singular while in v.4 it is plural. Isaiah pictures the nation like a person suffering under God’s wrath because of rebellion against God (1:5 – 6). Once united in sin and its divinely imposed consequences, the nation here engages as a body in one great act of thanksgiving in which — as the change to the plural implies — its every member will joyfully participate.

Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s forgiveness to the people in Babylonian exile (40:15; 43:25) will anticipate the sweet comfort of pardon they will know at the end of their history. The prophet declares the propitiatory basis of this pardon in the fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12).

In view of the contiguity of vv.1 – 2, it would be attractive to interpret the salvation declared in v.2 in spiritual terms, making it a virtual synonym of the forgiveness seen in v.1. This would bring it into line with the normal use of “salvation” in the NT instead of the physical sense it usually possesses in the OT. The physical and spiritual could be combined here, but there is little doubt the prophet has chiefly in mind the deliverance of the people from all of their enemies as a consequence of God’s forgiving grace. In a later passage Isaiah extols the comforting salvation of God in close connection with an exhortation to the people to leave the place of their captivity and return to Jerusalem (52:7 – 12).

The prophet takes up words from the Song of Moses in Exodus 15, so that Israel’s first and final expressions of corporate praise are here brought together. Psalm 118 also praises the Lord as the God of salvation from enemies. The words “The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation” are

identical in the Hebrew to two other verses (Ex 15:2; Ps 118:14), except that instead of the short poetical form “Yah,” Isaiah has “Yah Yahweh” (NIV, “The LORD, the LORD”; cf. Ex 34:6).The emphasis thus given to the divine name is altogether appropriate because the people’s trust in the Lord stands in strong contrast to the unbelief of Ahaz and the fact that, instead, his trust has been in Assyria (cf. Isa 7:1 – 9; 2Ki 16:7 – 18).

The assertion that God is or has become the salvation of his people goes perhaps beyond a simple statement that he has effected deliverance for them (see comment on 10:17). It is as though his person has taken color from his work; the person and the work belong together so that the one can hardly be conceived without the other. For a clearer NT parallel see 1 Corinthians 1:30; but the general concept lies behind a great deal of NT teaching about Christ, perhaps most of all in the way the term “Lamb” — descriptive of his sacrificial work — becomes a designation of his person in the last book of the Bible. To “the song of Moses, the servant of God” is added “the song of the Lamb”(Rev 15:3 – 4), for salvation receives its deeper meaning through him.

With the Lord being “my strength and my song” (v.2), we become aware that this God is now everything to his people. The personalizing form of the phrases implies exhaustiveness. Not only do the people rely on him for strength, but they have also abandoned all other trust. The prophet was warned in the inaugural vision of his ministry that the people would be spiritually unresponsive (6:9 – 10). He faced the fear and unbelief of Ahaz, their king (ch. 7). Even Hezekiah’s faith, real as it was (37:14 – 20), proved imperfect; for he, like Ahaz, had succumbed to the temptation to curry favor with potential military allies (ch. 39). In the future day Isaiah visualizes, however, trust in God the Savior will be so complete as to banish all fear.

Not only will the Lord receive all their faith;he will be the sole object of their song of praise.Who will say that this limits it? Other themes may seem narrow, but not the praise of earth’s Creator and his people’s Savior! The redeemed have nothing else to sing about and yet everything to sing about when their song is of him, for every worthy theme is gathered up in him who is supremely worthy.

3 In v.3, the singular gives place to the plural “you” in anticipation of v.4. Isaiah has already used the imagery of water to symbolize divine supplies that

are totally reliable and so can be trusted (8:6).The waters of Shiloah flowing gently and yet constantly into the city are replaced by wells of salvation from which the believing people may keep on drawing with joy. The figure suggests constant recourse on their part and constant provision on his. If v.2 reminds us of Exodus 15, with its glad song of deliverance, v.3 takes us on to Exodus 17, with its provision of water and its rebuke to unbelieving, joyless murmuring.

The term “salvation” occurs three times in these verses (vv.2 – 3) and nowhere else in chs. 1 – 12. If, in addition to the names of his sons, Isaiah’s own name, “The LORD is salvation,” is symbolic (8:18), there may here be an allusion to that name.

4 – 6 For the opening words of v.4, see the comments on vv.1 and 3. This introductory formula is followed in v.4 by three poetic lines, the first two of which are identical in Hebrew with Psalm 105:1.This psalm dwells on Egypt, the exodus, and the divine provision in the wilderness. This makes us aware of the fact that the second half of ch. 12 is occupied with the same theme as that expressed in v.1.

The proclamation to all the nations that the Lord’s name is exalted is typical of Isaiah (cf. 2:2 – 3,11, 17). So much of the language used in this chapter takes on deeper meaning when read in the light of the NT. The apostolic preachers, identifying Jesus as Lord of all, declared the exaltation of his name and exhorted people to call on him (Ac 2:21, 33; 3:13 – 16).

At v.5 we find ourselves back in Exodus 15:2, but without the references to horses, horsemen, and the sea — references that focus attention there on the victory of God over Egypt. The truth is that the exodus — special as it was to Israel as both the initial and the supreme act of God on her behalf, revealing the power of his arm — will be eclipsed by an even greater disclosure of God’s power (Isa 53:1).It will therefore take its place at the beginning of a whole sequence of divine saving acts that may now be celebrated retrospectively in their totality. It is not enough now that, as in the Song of Moses, the people praise his name simply in the presence of one another.The whole world must know what he has done so that his name may be exalted in “all the world [earth].” This again reminds us of the book of Acts and of the Great Commission that began to be fulfilled by the apostles.

The universalism of these verses is now modified, as is common in the Bible, by a form of par-ticularism. The song being sung is the celebration of God's forgiving grace and saving deeds for his own people, Zion. The pardoning grace of God is the source of many blessings, but none is more wonderful than his presence with his people. That presence was promised and sealed in the child Immanuel (cf. 7:14; 8:10). Here its realization is celebrated and extolled by his people. It is worth noting that the presence of God among his people is no contradiction of his transcendent uniqueness and separateness, expressed in the phrase "the Holy One of Israel." He is distinct but not aloof, for in him holiness and grace find their perfect union.

NOTES

1 שׁוּב (*yāšôḇ*, "turn") is a jussive; but the NIV, with other English versions, assumes textual corruption here and so translates it as an imperative. Jussives are perfectly natural, however, in addresses to God; so יָשׁוֹב should be rendered, "Let your [anger] turn."

2 1QIsaa repeats אֵל (*ʾēl*, "God") here, perhaps on the analogy of יָהּ יְהוָה (*yh yhwh*, "Yah Yahweh"; NIV, "The LORD, the LORD") later in the verse. Should this represent the true text, it would place even more emphasis than that already present on the totality of Israel's future trust in God alone.

II. GOD AND THE NATIONS (13:1 – 23:18)

OVERVIEW

God's chosen people were separated by him from the other nations to be his own special people, but they did not live their lives in isolation, for they were placed at the most strategic crossroads of the ancient world. Here they were brought into contact with many other peoples, especially the world powers of

Mesopotamia and the Nile, who could only engage each other in trade or conflict by taking a route through or very near Israel’s territory.

In Isaiah’s day the international scene was dominated by the cruel and aggressive Assyrians, who were ruled by a succession of ambitious monarchs.Such a situation left a buffer state with only two options: submission or protective alliance. This was the general political context for Isaiah’s prophetic ministry. Chapters 1 – 12 relate the kind of message he brought to Judah from the Lord. Foreign foes were instruments of God’s judgment on his people for their sins. They were not to seek relief in alliances with little neighbors or take shelter under the wing of the big aggressor; rather, they were to trust in the Lord himself. His own purposes for his people were sure to triumph in the end, even if — by reason of their own folly — they would experience much chastisement from his hand through the foreign foe.

The international situation brought Judah into contact with virtually all the other states of the Fertile Crescent; thus, it is most appropriate not only that oracles declaring the destiny of each should be given to Isaiah, but also that they should here be grouped together. All these states lived under the threat of Assyria and sought their own way of handling it. If Judah and Jerusalem, God’s own people, faced judgment — but not extinction — through Assyria (so chs. 1 – 12), it is inconceivable that these pagan nations should escape. These judgments were in effect anticipations of those universal judgments, which, along with the ultimate deliverance of the sons of Jacob, are set forth in chs. 24 – 27 as a climax to the oracles against the nations. Thus the divine holiness revealed to Isaiah in his temple vision (ch. 6) is to be expressed in judgment on Judah, her neighbors, and the whole universe.

Hayes and Irvine, 221ff., dispute the generally accepted view that these chapters were brought together for thematic reasons (i.e., because they are all oracles against nations). They consider them, in common with almost everything else in chs. 1 – 39, to be chronologically arranged. To do this view justice would require detailed consideration of each oracle from this point of view, and space does not allow this.Our treatment of them will proceed on the basis of the more usual topical view of their arrangement.

Some scholars consider that these chapters were subjected to editorial

structuring at a time when Babylon had replaced Assyria as the dominant threat to the little states that lay west of both, and that the prophecies concerning Babylon in chs. 13 – 14 and 21:1 – 10 (not on this view the work of Isaiah) were then added at the beginning and end of an existing series (for this view see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, 271 – 73).Others (e.g., Sweeney, in loc.), holding that the final form of the book is to be dated in the fifth century BC, point out that all these nations were brought under Persian control.

In fact, there were many nations that formed parts of each of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, so that the issue of the final date of this section cannot be settled by this consideration alone. If we accept prophetic prediction under divine inspiration as not only a possibility but also a reality, there is no need to think in terms of any provenance beyond Isaiah's day, the period when Assyria was a threat to all these nations (see Overview to 13:1 – 14:23).

Motyer (1999, in loc.), who often sees major sections of Isaiah developing subthemes found in the sections preceding them, points out that a minor theme in the passages about the coming king in the preceding section of the prophecy has the king's universal empire as a minor theme (9:7; 11:4, 6 – 9, 14 – 16). It is appropriate, therefore, for Isaiah to turn now to nations over whom the Messiah will rule (cf. also Delitzsch, in loc.).

A. Prophecy against Babylon (13:1 – 14:23)

OVERVIEW

This “oracle concerning Babylon” has been the focus of much scholarly attention. Many are reluctant to accept it as from Isaiah and instead assign it to the sixth century BC, shortly before Babylon was taken by Cyrus the Great of Persia, thus making the author a contemporary of a presumed Deutero-Isaiah. This view is based almost solely on the mention of Babylon and the Chaldeans within it. Many writers consider the reference to Babylon in such impressive terms to be inappropriate in Isaiah’s day because, as Barton, 85, says, the passage “seems to be talking about the downfall of a mighty power, not the punishment of a rebellious vassal.” But as Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out, under Merodach-Baladan Babylon was no cipher but a major threat to the overlordship of Assyria at that time. Even if it were not, we should not rule out supernatural prediction.

The whole basis of this judgment against the Isaianic authorship has been called into question by Erlandsson. In a masterly study of the passage, he argues for the authenticity of the whole series of prophecies against the nations (chs. 13 – 23) and this passage’s special place as standing after the chapters dealing with Judah’s relationship to Assyria and before a series of oracles against nations that were seeking freedom from Assyria’s yoke. He demonstrates (141) that it “appears not as an isolated entry in relation to its present context, but from the standpoint of both content and diction, is united to the texts which preceded and follow it.” He contends persuasively in his final chapter that the only historical context fully appropriate for it is 701 BC, when the various peoples mentioned in chs. 13 – 23 were all involved in anti-Assyrian coalitions. The attempt of Babylon to get Judah involved in such a coalition almost certainly lies behind what is recorded in ch. 39.

Erlandsson finally commits himself to a modified form of a view first put forward by Kissane, who held that the bulk of chs. 13 – 14 consists of an oracle first uttered against Assyria, which a later editor then applied to Babylon when

the latter had become Judah's chief oppressor. Erlandsson points out that the Assyrian monarchs bore also the title "king of Babylon" after Tiglath-Pileser III assumed it in 729 BC. This involved for most of them (Sennacherib, who hated all things Babylonian, being an excep-tion) the recognition of the Babylonian god Marduk. Erlandsson, 163, writes:

> The ideology which Babylon represented thus became the official religion in the Assyrian empire, and to a great extent the gods of Babylon superseded the Assyrian gods. But this also meant that revolutionary movements could easily gain a hold in the central city of that kingdom . . . . In an account which, for the most part, portrays how Yahweh will himself intervene and crush the proud Assyrians, the inclusion of the judgment against Babylon in 13:19 – 22 is not entirely unmotivated. Babylon has offered Judah another way of getting rid of the Assyrians than by relying on Yahweh. But just as certainly as Yahweh will overthrow the proud Assyrians, so will he lay Babylon in ruins and this will take place soon.

Erlandsson's view is to be preferred to Kissane's.It may be objected that it makes the introduction to the oracle, with its general reference to Babylon, seem strange. Erlandsson, 165, points out, however, that there is a parallel phenomenon in 17:1 – 11, where references to Ephraim and Jacob occur in an oracle concerning Damascus. Ephraim had become involved with Damascus and must share something of its judgment. The same would be true of Assyria and Babylon. Erlandsson, 166, says:

> The heading . . . means that, in the text that follows under that heading, namely 13:2 – 14:27, there are words spoken by the prophet against Babylon . . . .This is exactly the case in 13:19 – 22 and in the introduction to the epilogue, 14:22b – 23. But the rest of the contents also stand in relation to these words of judgment against Babylon, because the clear statement that it is Yahweh himself who will humble the proud and arrogant, 13:2 – 18, overthrow the proud tyrant, 14:4b – 21, and thus crush Assyria and free the people from the Assyrian yoke, 14:24 – 27, is indirectly a judgment over Babylon which wishes to drive out Yahweh and become the power on which the people will place their hopes.

Jeremiah 50 – 51 makes use of phraseology and ideas from Isaiah 13 – 14 and applies them to the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (see Erlandsson, ch. 7). In Jeremiah 50:17 – 18 the prophet declares:

> "Israel is a scattered flock
> that lions have chased away.
> The first to devour him was
> the king of Assyria;
> the last to crush his bones
> was Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon."
> Therefore this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says:

"I will punish the king of Babylon and his land
as I punished the king of Assyria."

Here is the recognition that the kings of Assyria and Babylon, having a common guilt in relation to Israel, will share a common punishment. Jacques Ellul (*The Meaning of the City* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970], 190) maintains that, as the book of Revelation shows, there are really only two principles of organization for a society: the Babylon principle (antagonism toward God) and the Jerusalem principle (submission to his purposes). The Babylon principle is to be seen right through 13:1 – 14:27, even if, as Erlandsson suggests, much of it may apply at first to Assyria and its king.

Is it really necessary, however, to transfer almost everything in these two chapters to Assyria? I, while grateful for much in Erlandsson's book, do not think so. We may accept the events of 701 BC as providing the historical conditions that occasioned this oracle without holding that most of it was fulfilled in the downfall of Assyria. If we accept supernatural foreknowledge in a prophet, his prophecy may be given in one historical era and fulfilled in another. True, Erlandsson never raises rationalistic objections to supernatural prediction, but it is doubtful that his interpretation takes its possibility sufficiently into account. I will therefore expound the oracle as a prediction of the downfall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and its monarch, uttered by Isaiah at the close of the eighth century and so intended as a warning to Hezekiah and Judah not to put their trust in coalitions against Assyria inspired by Babylon (cf. ch. 39). It could even have been seen to be apt at the time it was uttered if we take account of Motyer's comment mentioned above.

1 An oracle concerning Babylon that Isaiah son of Amoz saw:

2 Raise a banner on a bare hilltop,
shout to them;
beckon to them
to enter the gates of the nobles.

3 I have commanded my holy ones;
I have summoned my warriors to carry out my wrath —
those who rejoice in my triumph.

4 Listen, a noise on the mountains,
like that of a great multitude!
Listen, an uproar among the kingdoms,
like nations massing together!
The LORD Almighty is mustering
an army for war.

5 They come from faraway lands,
from the ends of the heavens —
the LORD and the weapons of his wrath —
to destroy the whole country.

6 Wail, for the day of the LORD is near;
it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

7 Because of this, all hands will go limp,
every man’s heart will melt.

8 Terror will seize them,
pain and anguish will grip them;
they will writhe like a woman in labor.
They will look aghast at each other,
their faces aflame.

9 See, the day of the LORD is coming
— a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger —
to make the land desolate
and destroy the sinners within it.

10 The stars of heaven and their constellations
will not show their light.
The rising sun will be darkened
and the moon will not give its light.

11 I will punish the world for its evil,
the wicked for their sins.
I will put an end to the arrogance of the haughty
and will humble the pride of the ruthless.

12 I will make man scarcer than pure gold,
more rare than the gold of Ophir.

13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble;
and the earth will shake from its place
at the wrath of the LORD Almighty,
in the day of his burning anger.

14 Like a hunted gazelle,
like sheep without a shepherd,
each will return to his own people,
each will flee to his native land.

15 Whoever is captured will be thrust through;
all who are caught will fall by the sword.

16 Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes;
their houses will be looted and their wives ravished.

17 See, I will stir up against them the Medes,
who do not care for silver
and have no delight in gold.

18 Their bows will strike down the young men;
they will have no mercy on infants
nor will they look with compassion on children.

19 Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms,
the glory of the Babylonians' pride,
will be overthrown by God
like Sodom and Gomorrah.
20 She will never be inhabited
or lived in through all generations;
no Arab will pitch his tent there,
no shepherd will rest his flocks there.
21 But desert creatures will lie there,
jackals will fill her houses;
there the owls will dwell,
and there the wild goats will leap about.
22 Hyenas will howl in her strongholds,
jackals in her luxurious palaces.
Her time is at hand,
and her days will not be prolonged.
14:1 The LORD will have compassion on Jacob;
once again he will choose Israel
and will settle them in their own land.
Aliens will join them
and unite with the house of Jacob.
2 Nations will take them
and bring them to their own place.
And the house of Israel will possess the nations
as menservants and maidservants in the LORD 's land.
They will make captives of their captors
and rule over their oppressors.
3 On the day the LORD gives you relief from suffering and turmoil and cruel bondage, 4 you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon:
How the oppressor has come to an end!
How his fury has ended!
5 The LORD has broken the rod of the wicked,
the scepter of the rulers,
6 which in anger struck down peoples
with unceasing blows,
and in fury subdued nations
with relentless aggression.
7 All the lands are at rest and at peace;
they break into singing.
8 Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon
exult over you and say,
"Now that you have been laid low,
no woodsman comes to cut us down."
9 The grave below is all astir
to meet you at your coming;
it rouses the spirits of the departed to greet you —

all those who were leaders in the world;
it makes them rise from their thrones —
all those who were kings over the nations.
10 They will all respond,
they will say to you,
“You also have become weak, as we are;
you have become like us.”
11 All your pomp has been brought down to the grave,
along with the noise of your harps;
maggots are spread out beneath you
and worms cover you.
12 How you have fallen from heaven,
O morning star, son of the dawn!
You have been cast down to the earth,
you who once laid low the nations!
13 You said in your heart,
“I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne
above the stars of God;
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,
on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain.
14 I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.”
15 But you are brought down to the grave,
to the depths of the pit.
16 Those who see you stare at you,
they ponder your fate:
“Is this the man who shook the earth
and made kingdoms tremble,
17 the man who made the world a desert,
who overthrew its cities
and would not let his captives go home?”
18 All the kings of the nations lie in state,
each in his own tomb.
19 But you are cast out of your tomb
like a rejected branch;
you are covered with the slain,
with those pierced by the sword,
those who descend to the stones of the pit.
Like a corpse trampled underfoot,
20 you will not join them in burial,
for you have destroyed your land
and killed your people.
The offspring of the wicked
will never be mentioned again.
21 Prepare a place to slaughter his sons

for the sins of their forefathers;
they are not to rise to inherit the land
and cover the earth with their cities.
22 “I will rise up against them,”
declares the LORD Almighty.
“I will cut off from Babylon her name and survivors,
her offspring and descendants,”
declares the LORD.
23 “I will turn her into a place for owls
and into swampland;
I will sweep her with the broom of destruction,”
declares the LORD Almighty.

COMMENTARY

1 The use of a surname or patronymic, as here, designates a person with some precision. In view of the widespread denial to Isaiah, son of Amoz, of any part in prophecies concerning Babylon, we may see a special evidential purpose in its use here.

2 – 5 Isaiah’s prophetic greatness lies chiefly in the exalted character and vast range of his themes, but allied to this is an outstanding gift for vivid, memorable communication. In these verses the reader or hearer is presented first with a sight, then with a sound. So, for the imagination, two senses combine to convey a reality so impressive as almost to be tangible.

Imagination’s curtain is drawn aside and a bare hilltop is disclosed, surmounted by a banner (v.2).The word  (“banner”) is a favorite with Isaiah (cf. 5:26; 11:12; 18:3; 33:23 [“sail”]; 62:10), and it symbolizes God’s direction of history (Motyer,1993, in loc.). A shout and a gesture are added, so that the army will be mustered with urgency.The phrases “a bare hilltop” and “the gates of the nobles” suggest a contrast between the remote areas from which the army comes and the sophisticated urban civilization they will destroy.

As with the war against the Assyrians (cf. 10:5), this army is the instrument of the Lord. “Holy”(v.3) has no character reference here; but like all words from the root *qdš*, it implies that the persons so designated have been set apart from others, set apart, that is, by the Lord for his purpose of punitive destruction. This is emphasized by the use of the emphatic personal pronoun “I” at the start of v.3.

After the single shout of command comes a tumultuous roar (v.4), the sound of human voices in such numbers and volume that words are indistinguishable in the general hubbub. The references to kingdoms, nations, and faraway lands would fit the armies of each of the successive world powers from Assyria through Babylon to Persia; but the mention of the Medes in v.17, plus words such as “hilltop”and “mountains,” suggest the army is being massed on the great Iranian plateau. “The ends of the heavens” (v.5) probably refers to the distant horizons and so to the “faraway lands,” the Zagros mountain area, beyond which were the lands of the Medes.Motyer (1993, in loc.), however, thinks the mountains are those that surround Jerusalem, thus distinguishing them from the faraway lands.

The appropriateness of Isaiah’s selection of designations for God can be seen in his use of Yahweh *ṣĕbā᾽ôṯ*(“LORD Almighty”) here. Clements (in loc.)says, “The five lines in verses 4 – 5 show evidence of a masterfully concise but dramatic description which gains additional effect through the pervading rhythm 3 plus 2.”

The opening verses of the oracle clearly show that the armies are the Lord’s instruments and that they come to execute his wrathful judgment (vv.3,5). On whom? The RSV translates *kol-hā᾽āreṣ* in v.5 as “the whole earth”; but most modern versions, including the NIV, render it as “the whole country”or “the whole land.” This latter is certainly possible, although Motyer (1993, in loc.), comparing this passage with 14:26, argues for the wider translation because he sees Babylon here as representing the whole world, which would mean that the passage anticipates both later parts of the chapter and also the special use of “Babylon” in the book of the Revelation.

6 – 8 The “day of the LORD” (v.6) is a frequent prophetic theme (see Note on 2:11), emphasizing the certainty and decisiveness of the Lord’s historical judgment in the future. It may be conceived in local or in universal terms. In this chapter it seems to move from the one to the other (see the comments on vv.9, 11). Isaiah’s fondness for wordplay is shown in the phrase *kĕšōd miššadday*(“like destruction from the Almighty”). The Lord will expound his great name of power in terms of destruction when the day of his judgment dawns.

In vv.7 – 8 the prophet piles up expression after expression to convey the sense of fear that will overwhelm the objects of God's judgment. The phrase "their faces aflame" (v.8) comes as something of a surprise, for shock normally pales the face. He is probably suggesting that the judgment will be seen by those judged not simply as a visitation of pain but as punishment for wrongdoing, thus making them blush.

9 – 13 At this point this oracle of judgment on a great and coming world power begins to expand to cover the whole world, though the NIV's translation of הָאָרֶץ as "land" rather than "earth" in v.9 (bringing it into line substantially with its translation of v.5) suggests it is still local here. But this translation is open to question. No doubt it was determined by a felt need of consistency of translation in vv.5, 9; but the cosmic dimensions of vv.10 – 13 strongly suggest that v.9 — intimately connected with it — needs to be understood universally also.

Matthew 24 shows Jesus, in similar fashion, relating a local judgment that was to fall on Jerusalem to the great events that would usher in his second advent and the end of the age. Every local judgment is meant to stir in human beings a recognition of final accountability. We know little of inspiration as a process, but it is not impossible that Isaiah's awareness of the narrower and wider uses of הָאָרֶץ may have been a trigger to move the prophet's mind and so his prophecy from the local scene to the universal.

God created the natural order as an environment for human beings, as Genesis 1 reveals. The fall disturbed this order, and some indication of this is given in the penalties prescribed by God (Ge 3:14 – 19). In Isaiah 13:10 we see God's hand of judgment falling on the great heavenly bodies, whose regular motions strongly support our belief in an ordered universe. Their light-giving function (cf. Ge 1:14 – 19) will be hindered. "Without light life is impossible and everything will revert back to chaos" (Widyapranawa, in loc.). This language is to be taken up in our Lord's great apocalyptic discourse (Mt 24:29; Mk 13:24 – 25; cf. Isa 34:4), and the sun hid its face when his own supreme act of sin-bearing took place (Mt 27:45; Mk 15:33; Lk 23:44 – 45).

It is thoroughly characteristic of Isaiah to mention arrogance and pride as prime targets of God's judgment on the wicked (v.11; cf. 2:11 – 18; 3:16 – 24;10:8 – 16). Human pride offers a blatant insult to the God who is highly

exalted and to whom all of his moral creatures should submit in obedient worship.Verse 12 makes it particularly clear that the judgment pictured is universal. As O. Kaiser (in loc.)puts it, “The prophecy makes it impossible for the hearer or reader to imagine that he is unaffected by the coming day of Yahweh.”

Verse 13 seems to go even beyond v.10 in depicting the effects of divine judgment on the natural universe. There is to be a general convulsion of the whole created order (cf. 34:4). In this way the instability of the order of things since the fall will be disclosed (as it is seen in so many of the signs of Christ’s coming in Mk 13), thus revealing the need for the eternally stable order of the kingdom of God that Christ’s coming will establish.

14 – 16 Motyer (1993, in loc.), sensitive to literary features in the prophetic literature, says, “The picture of gathering armies with which the poem of the day of the Lord began (2 – 5) is balanced by this concluding picture of people scattering from the disaster — and being overtaken by it.” The prophet has made no reference to the human agents of God’s punitive justice since v.5; and at least since v.10, if not before, it has been abundantly clear that a universal judgment is in view. By definition such a judgment cannot be humanly executed, for every man and woman are to come under it.The prophet now returns, however, to the more local judgment on Babylon, for it is clear that human agencies of punishment are now being used again. A prediction of the day of the Lord may expand and then contract again in this way, because each particular judgment foreshadows the great, ultimate punishment to fall on the human race as a whole.

Beginning with Tiglath-Pileser III, each of the great empires of Mesopotamia followed a policy of transportation and intermingling of peoples. As Babylon is entered by its conquerors, exiles from their own homelands living there feel their isolation; and, like hunted or neglected animals, they try to make for home (v.14). Such attempts at survival will be fruitless. The bitter enemies of their overlords will make no distinction between the native-born and the unwilling incomer (vv.15 – 16). This part of the prophecy has probably taken some color from the universal judgment depicted earlier in the chapter, for it shows that Babylon’s downfall will mean the deaths of many aliens who are in it when the blow falls.

17 – 22 Verse 17 is of special interest because of its reference to the Medes. These Iranian people, along with other Aryan tribes, came onto the Iranian plateau about the beginning of the first millennium BC. They were a constant thorn in the flesh of the Assyrian kings, and in 612 BC they captured the Assyrian capital, Nineveh. Thus in Isaiah's day they were a significant factor on the international scene. They had, however, no special antagonism toward Babylon at this time. In fact, the Babylonians were their allies in the eventual sacking of Nineveh.By the mid-sixth century BC, however, the situation was very different. For a while the Medes and the Persians (their fellow Aryans) were enemies, but then the Medes put their fierce fighting force at the disposal of Cyrus the Persian and were involved with him in the overthrow of Babylon in 539 BC.

The Medes are probably mentioned here rather than the Persians because of their greater ferocity and because they were better known to the people of Isaiah's day. According to the Greek historian Xenophon, Cyrus acknowledged that the Medes had served his cause without thought of monetary reward. Wildberger (in loc.) points out that "the transfer of power from Medes to Persians in Iran was viewed more as a change of dynasty than that one world power was freeing itself from another."

Babylon, a very ancient city (cf. Ge 10:10;11:1 – 9), enjoyed a special prestige in the Near East even in times of decline — a status shared by its leading deity, Marduk, and well expressed in the phrase "the jewel of kingdoms," which Isaiah gives it (v.19). Already Babylon was a sure candidate for divine judgment, but the cup of its sin was to become full in its new empire, when it would oppress many nations and destroy Jerusalem and its temple. If, as Erlandsson maintains (see the general comment at the beginning of this section), this oracle dates from 701 BC, Isaiah's use of the analogy of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (v.19) may be compared with 1:9 – 10, a passage probably dating from the same period. This analogy suggests not only complete destruction but also its moral cause.

As Erlandsson, 91, points out, the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who detested Babylon, utterly devastated it in 689 BC. This was, perhaps, a partial fulfillment of the prophecy given here (vv.20 – 22), just as some of Isaiah's messianic prophecies received anticipatory fulfillment before their final realization in Christ (see comment on 7:14 – 17). Babylon was quickly rebuilt, and no

comparable destruction took place in 539 BC. The prophecy did find fulfillment, but over a considerable period of time. Darius the Great and Xerxes both issued important decrees of demolition.Alexander the Great apparently had great plans for it that did not survive his death, and by the close of the first century BC Babylon was utterly desolate. So it is today. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small. The chapter's last sentence refers to Sennacherib's act of vengeance that began the whole process and that was to be accomplished within twelve years of this prophecy.

14:1 – 4a These verses are saturated with allusions to the exodus from Egypt and the entry into Canaan. The "new exodus" theme, so important later in the book of Isaiah, is the controlling motif here. The clue to this is given in the words "once again he will choose Israel" (v.1). Clements (in loc.) says: "The entire history surrounding the former election of Israel had been brought to an end with the Babylonian exile. A whole new beginning would have to be made, which would amount to a new act of divine election." The expulsion of Israel from Canaan at the exile would certainly make it look as though God had finally set aside the covenant, so often flagrantly broken by the people. Not so, for such was the depth and persistence of his steadfast love that his covenantal purpose was never eclipsed by their unfaithfulness. His new choice was really a reaffirmation of the old in the return from Babylon.

The repeated name "Jacob" is a reminder that — as at the exodus, so now — it is the God of the patriarchs who sets his love on the people (cf. Ex 3:6 – 9). The patriarchs had been given the land by divine promise; so, in God's purpose, it was already "their own land" as far back as that.O. Kaiser (in loc.) points out that ,אדמה("soil, land") in the expression "their own land" is used also in Ezekiel 37:14; he adds, "We may perhaps suggest that this word, which originally referred to the red-brown arable land suitable for cultivation, possessed through its contrast with dismal, uncultivated land the emotive associations of our word 'home,' reflecting as in Ezekiel the splendour of the Promised Land."

When Israel left Egypt, there were many other people ("aliens") with them. There were also many within their gates (Ex 20:10; 22:21; et al.). Jethro, Rahab, and other believing Gentiles found a place within the covenant of God with Israel. So it would be again (cf. 56:3 – 8). Not only so, but also the nations in the land would become their servants (v.2;cf. 60:9 – 14; 61:5), just as the Gibeonites and others became in the original entry to the land. There are parallels to much

of this in the return from exile, for it was a decree of the Gentile Cyrus that was its immediate human cause (Ezr 1:1 – 4; cf. Ezr 6:1 – 12).Some elements of the prophecy were not fulfilled at this time, however — especially the picture of God's people governing their oppressors. No doubt these are properly eschatological, so that the return from Babylon itself foreshadows God's ultimate purpose for the people (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 52).

Verse 3 may remind the Christian that there is a spiritual fulfillment of much OT prophecy.Writing on this verse, O. Kaiser (in loc.) says:

> The day on which Yahweh gives rest to the suffering community . . . brings an end to weary toil (cf.Gen 5:29), to the restless turmoil and forced labour (Exod 4:14; 6:9) . . . which is now imposed upon the community that is being directly addressed.When the people are set free . . . the land of their inheritance will be a place of rest, a place where they will remain undisturbed (cf. Deut 12:9f. and 25:19).

Apart from its assumptions about the addressees, this comment is apt. This verse reminds us of the letter to the Hebrews, with its teaching that the true rest for God's people was never found in Canaan but is now given in Christ (Heb 3:7 – 4:11).

The detailed parallel between the exodus and the return from the exile may even embrace v.4, because the Song of Moses, an exultant celebration of the Lord's mighty power made known at the exodus, was at the same time a triumphant assertion of the overthrow of Pharaoh and his hosts (Ex 15).

4b – 11 At this point, one of the greatest poems in the whole prophetic corpus commences and runs through v.21. In form it is a funeral dirge, with the characteristic limping rhythm of a Hebrew lament — so plaintive and yet ominous to the sensitive ear. This form is apt, for it speaks of death (vv.9 – 11, 15); but it is deeply ironic, and the lament form is a cloak for a taunt, and a joyous one at that (vv.7 – 8). Laments are sung at a funeral but not this time, for this tyrant is to be denied proper burial.

The subject is "the king of Babylon," the oppressor (v.4), though most commentators agree that no one king is in view. This kind of personalizing, however, serves the ends of graphic presentation.Both Oswalt and Watts (in loc.) make this point and also comment on the dramatic way the action shifts from

one scene to another.

The reference to “the LORD” in v.5 is important.Apart from the less direct references of vv.13 – 14,he is mentioned only here in the poem, yet he dominates it as much as he does the book of Esther. It is he whose action is implied in all the passive verbs of the poem. If the oppressor has ceased, this is not simply due to the antagonism and resourcefulness of human foes but rather because God has taken action to bring him low. God does not need to emphasize this; a brief mention is enough to give the reader the true perspective from which to view the events described.

The “unceasing blows” and “relentless aggression” of v.6 conjure up an atmosphere of terror.When a great tyrant reigns in Mesopotamia, all the little nations cower in constant fear, like dogs fearing the boot of a cruel master. How impressive, then, is the great change intimated in v.7! Just as the calm after the storm heralds the song of shepherds in Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*, so the glorious peace that followed the downfall of the Babylonian oppressor becomes the setting for the glad sound of rejoicing.

The pine trees and cedars of v.8 may be literal, figurative, or both. The monarchs of Assyria and Babylon were greedy for wood, and their woodcutters stripped whole districts of their trees. They knew nothing of ecology, but it is doubtful whether they would have heeded its claims if they had.Lebanon, with its magnificent trees, suffered more than most conquered territories at their hands. Just as Mark 13:24 – 25 can be understood both literally and symbolically, so these trees may refer also to human rulers (cf. 2:13; Jer 22:7; Eze 17:3; 31:3).They too are safe now.

Verses 9 – 15 are “an imaginative visit to Sheol”(Motyer, 1993, in loc.) and will remind some readers of the writings of Dante or Milton or *The Great Divorce* by C. S. Lewis. “The grave” (v.9) is the NIV’s translation of שְׁאוֹל (which the NASB simply transliterates as “Sheol”), the place of the dead (see Note on v.15). The Babylonian king, though dead, still exists but now in a different sphere. The picture of the petty kings rising from their thrones to accord a mocking welcome to their oppressor powerfully appeals to the imagination and clearly contains some elements that were never intended to be taken literally. This does not mean, however, that Sheol did not possess objective reality. Its NT

equivalent is Hades, and the picture there of the dead man in torment was clearly intended by our Lord to be taken seriously (Lk 16:23). Motyer (1993, in loc.) helpfully spells out the central OT truths about the dead to be seen here.

To rise from one's seat is a token of respect in many cultures. Here, though, it indicates not only surprise but also mock homage on the part of those whose submission had been all-too-real, though unwilling, during their lifetime. They had heard the sound of the Babylonian harpers making music for the king as they were brought trembling into his court. All the pomp and circumstance have disappeared (v.11). His palace would have been replete with soft couches and lush carpets to give him all the comfort he could desire, but the maggots and decomposition had taken over.

12 – 17 The song continues. Isaiah's prophecies make some use of what has been called "dead mythology." The language of the myth — known but not accepted as true by the prophet and his hearers — becomes a vehicle for his thought by supplying the basis of an analogy. Was this passage echoed by the Lord Jesus in Luke 10:18 in his reference to Satan? Oswalt (in loc.) points out that the great Reformation expositors never linked the Isaiah passage with this verse or with Revelation 12:8, for what Isaiah is dealing with is not superhuman but human pride. This is true, and yet it is also true that the pride of the king of Babylon was truly satanic.

When Satan works his malign will through rulers of this world, he reproduces his own wicked qualities in them, so that they become virtual shadows of which he is the substance. So we may say that the passage points to Satan, not directly but indirectly, much like the way the kings of the line of David point to Christ. All rulers of international significance whose overweening pride and arrogance bring them to ruin under the hand of God's judgment illustrate both the satanic and the antichrist principles, for these principles are really one.

Verse 13 reminds us of the Tower of Babel (Ge 11:1 – 9), though the endeavor to be like God takes us right back to Genesis 3, where Satan first sought to reproduce in human life his own proud aspirations for equal status with God. The possession of power or even just a taste of it can create a desire for utter supremacy. Lord Acton's dictum — "All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely" — and Milton's somewhat controversial description of

Satan as “by merit raised to that bad eminence” both testify to the fact that high authority has a potential for grave spiritual danger.

The dominant feature of vv.13 – 14 is the repeated “I.” Only God himself has a right to speak in this fashion (13:11 – 12; 14:24 – 25; 41:9 – 10, 17 – 19;et al.). The analogy from Canaanite mythology (see comment on v.12 and also further Note) probably includes the reference to the sacred mountain. Like the proud figure in the myth, the king of Babylon sought absolute sovereignty. It is a strange paradox that nothing makes a being less like God than the effort to be his equal, for he who was God stepped down from the throne of his glory to display to the wondering eyes of men the humility of God (Php 2:5 – 8).

The leveling power of death is again underlined (vv.15 – 16; cf. vv.9 – 10). The death of one of such worldly greatness causes people to think hard. The writer of Ecclesiastes was correct in that more lessons may be learned about the meaning of existence at the place of death than the place of birth (cf. Ecc 7:1 – 4). Only God has the right to make the earth tremble (v.16; cf. 13:13; 24:1 – 4). Human tyranny can go too far, and God acts against it from his all-sovereign throne (cf. 40:23 – 24).

For the references to “the grave” and “the pit,”see the Note. For the contrast between heaven and Sheol/Hades as the highest and lowest places in the universe, compare passages such as Romans 10:6 – 7 and Ephesians 4:9 – 10.

18 – 21 We know from Egyptian pyramids and other royal tombs how much stress was put on proper burial — with all the proper rites and ceremonies — in the Fertile Crescent in OT times. How horrifying to a great king of Babylon and his contemporaries was the prospect of his lying out in the open (v.19), unburied, his royal body undistinguished and perhaps indistinguishable from those of his soldiers, then thrown into a common burial pit. What is the cause of such a fate? Here it is not what he has done to other nations but the fact that, like Napoleon, Hitler, and others, he has led many of his people into death on the battlefield to gratify his lust for power. God therefore makes the punishment fit the crime.

The principle of group solidarity in punishment is seen throughout the OT (v.21; cf. Ex 20:5 – 6;Nu 16:31 – 35; Jos 7:24 – 26). Isaiah states it first as a general principle before applying it to the particular situation in view here. The

conqueror covering the earth with cities reminds us of Genesis 10:8 – 11 and possibly implies that this Babylonian dynasty was following its great predecessor, Nimrod. Alexander the Great and many another ruler have sought to perpetuate their names through great city-building enterprises (cf. also Ge 11:4). No throne, no tomb, no progeny, no cities — in all these ways the Lord abases those who seek self-exaltation.

22 – 23 These verses are an appendix to the taunt song. Here the all-powerful divine King asserts his own intention to act against Babylon. Clearly v.22 reflects the language of vv.20b – 21, but it also goes back to v.20a. The king of Babylon's sin will bring destruction — not only to his people but also to his land. He wanted to possess the earth, but in fact the very reverse will take place; for his own land will be possessed — not even by human beings but by owls (v.23; cf. Ps 102:6) — and it will be covered with pools of stagnant water.

The domestic analogy with which the passage closes has an eloquence all its own (cf. 1Ki 14:10;21:21; 2Ki 21:13). We can almost hear the woman of the house breathing a sigh of relief as she sweeps the rubbish out her door, knowing her house is at last clean and fit for human habitation. Rubbish fit only for the broom of judgment — this is God's verdict on mighty Babylon! C. Seitz (*Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991], 137) points out that in Isaiah 13 – 14

> the prophet "saw" beyond his own day to a coming day of the Lord yet greater than anything that had transpired during the period of Assyrian domination. . .. The violence and pride of Assyria was far outstripped.A world judgment is executed to eliminate all vestiges of human pride and arrogance, and in the end the agent of judgment is itself brought low — to lower estate than anything ever imagined for Assyria (cf. 10:33 – 34).

NOTES

1 מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*; GK 5363) occurs twelve times in Isaiah in its technical sense of "oracle" (13:1; 14:28;15:1; 17:1; 19:1; 21:1, 11, 13; 22:1, 25; 23:1; 30:6). It occurs in this sense elsewhere about the same number of times, except for Jeremiah 23:33 – 38 (where it occurs often), a particularly important passage for understanding it. Despite extensive study, its exact significance is still in doubt (see the discussion in Watts, in loc.). The translations "burden" and "oracle" are

both feasible etymologically. The former underlines the frequent emphasis on judgment in such utterances, but most scholars now favor “oracle.” Most prophecies so designated are in fact oracles of divine judgment, although 19:1 introduces a prophecy with a note of hope as well as of judgment. See Erlandsson, 64 – 65, for comment and documentation; see also Tremper Longman III (*Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk* [The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 2:786).

2 The NIV follows the MT in rendering “beckon to them to enter the gates of the nobles” (cf. NASB), while the NEB follows the LXX in translating “draw your swords, you nobles.” The MT is probably to be preferred. To designate as nobles the objects of the Lord’s wrath would be ironic, based on their own self-estimate and suggesting their arrogance (cf. v.11).

5 In Assyrian inscriptions the Medes are frequently described as “the distant-dwelling Medes.”

18 The Hebrew of the first clause reads literally, “and the bows of the young men are shattered”; many emendations have been proposed, but none carry general conviction with scholars. The text as it stands may refer to the ineffectiveness of Babylon’s armies to repulse the Medes (cf. Young, in loc.).

21 – 22 The OT contains many problems of zoological identification (see esp. F. S. Bodenheimer, *Animals and Man in Bible Lands* [Leiden: Brill, 1960]). צִיִּים (*ṣiyîm*)cannot be identified with any certainty. It is connected with צִי (*ṣî*, “desert”) and so here and elsewhere (Isa 23:13; 34:14; Jer 50:39) may simply designate wild beasts of the desert generally. A reference to demonic desert-dwellers rather than animal ones is more difficult if we assume a consistent meaning for it throughout the passages where it occurs.

אִיִּים (*ʾîyîm*, “jackals”) is a *hapax legomenon*. It seems to be connected with the onomatopoeic אָהּ (*ʾāhh.ah*., “ah!”) and so to refer to a howling or screeching creature. The Holy Land’s fauna present us with several candidates, as its residents well know.

שָׂעִירִם (*śāʿîrîm*, “wild goats”) are clearly hairy creatures. The apparent use of the

word in connection with some kind of demon or satyr in Leviticus 17:7 has influenced the LXX and most moderns to interpret the reference mythologically, though G. R. Driver (“Lilith,” *PEQ* 91 [1959]: 55ff.) contends for a strictly zoological interpretation. Certainly the other creatures referred to in these verses seem to belong to the animal kingdom.אִיִּים (*ʾiyyîm*)are probably “hyenas,” as here translated, or else “jackals,” though the LXX took them to be apes and the Vulgate owls. תַּנִּים (*tannîn*) are fairly common in the OT, and the word is rendered variously in English versions. Here it seems likely to be some kind of jackal or wolf. Clements (in loc.) rightly remarks, “The sense is clear and is not really dependent on the precise identity of the species of wild animal that are referred to.”

14:4 מַדְהֵבָה (*madhēbâ*)is difficult, in fact unintelligible.The word does occur several times in the DSS but without ascertainable meaning.The versions present several diverse readings. The NIV and most English versions follow the LXX, which presupposes מַדְהֵבָה (*madhēbâ*) NIV, “his fury”), though Erlandsson disputes this. Wildberger proposes emendations yielding the sense “tyrant” or “stormer.” See the extended note in Erlandsson, who takes it to mean “gold tribute.”

12 הֵילֵל (*hêlēl*, “morning star”; GK 2122) has possible links with Akkadian *elletu* (“Ishtar”) and Arabic *hilal* (“new moon”). Scholars have shown particular interest in possible connections with the use of the same root in Ugaritic in the Ras Shamra texts from northern Canaan. It is clear enough that in all these Semitic languages the root suggests brightness. In the Ras Shamra polytheism, the morning star attempts to climb beyond all other heavenly bodies to the mountain of the gods in the far north. This would challenge the supremacy of אֵל עֶלְיוֹן (*ʾēl ʿelyôn*cf. Ge 14:18 – 20), the monarch of the gods. Thus, *hêlēl* is cast down.It seems likely that elements of the myth, probably well known throughout Canaan, provide features of the analogy that runs through vv.12 – 15. Such an analogy from mythology would be particularly appropriate when applied to the polytheistic Babylonians, whose mythology had many links with that of Ugarit.See the major note in Wildberger.

13 The language of this verse can be interpreted in terms of the myth (see previous Note), with the mount of assembly identified as Zaphon, the northern mountain that is the residence of Ba,al in the Ras Shamra texts.בְּיַרְכְּתֵי צָפוֹן (*bᵉyarkᵉtê ṣāpôn,* “on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain”) is literally, “on the side of the north” (cf. Eze 38:6, 15; 39:2). It is, however, associated with Zion in Ps 48:2,

though this too may reflect the language of the myth.The use of such language abstracted from its polytheistic setting is comparable to Paul's use of the language of pagan poets in relation to the true God in Acts 17:28.

15 שְׁאוֹל (*šᵉʾôl*)and בּוֹר (*bôr*), translated as "grave" and "pit" respectively, are virtual synonyms for the place of departed spirits, the latter developed probably from the place of burial. See more, see the articles "Sheol," *ZPEB*, 5:395; "Pit," *ZPEB*, 4:802.

19 The NIV's rendering of כְּנֵצֶר נִתְעָב (*kᵉnēṣer niṯʿāḇ*) as "like a rejected branch" makes good sense, conveying an idea not unlike that of 18:5 – 6 (cf. Jn 15:6). It is an analogy and so need not be treated as a euphemism for an abortion, as the Targum and some of the versions have translated it and for which Wildberger (in loc.) argues.

B. Prophecy against Assyria (14:24 – 27)

OVERVIEW

Widyapranawa (in loc.) comments on the placing of an Assyrian oracle here when Assyria had already faced judgment in ch. 10. By bringing oracles against the two great Mesopotamian powers in this way, the point is strongly made that Yahweh is the Lord of history in all ages. Many critics hold this passage to be incomplete, some considering it part of 10:5 – 15.

Erlandsson, 125 – 27, by contrast, reckons these verses should be treated, with vv.22 – 23, as an epilogue to the burden of Babylon (see Overview to 13:1 – 14:23). For him the epilogue is the key to understanding the whole burden of Babylon, because in his view the burden deals with both Babylon and Assyria, the Assyrian king having assumed, both politically and religiously, the role of Babylon's ruler.There was, of course, an emotional link between the names "Babylon" and "Assyria" for people under threat from Mesopotamia, and this is enough to account for placing this brief oracle at this point.

24 The LORD Almighty has sworn,
"Surely, as I have planned, so it will be,
and as I have purposed, so it will stand.
25 I will crush the Assyrian in my land;
on my mountains I will trample him down.
His yoke will be taken from my people,
and his burden removed from their shoulders."
26 This is the plan determined for the whole world;
this is the hand stretched out over all nations.
27 For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?
His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

COMMENTARY

24 – 25 Sometimes in Isaiah a divine statement is underlined in some particularly emphatic way (cf.5:9; 9:7; 37:32), and so it is here.The name of God

is used here (cf. comment on 1:9) combines with the statement of his settled purpose (cf. 5:19) to assure us that the Assyrians cannot survive. If such a mighty God has designed to crush them, they are doomed indeed. As though to reinforce this certainty still more, God speaks of “my land” and “my mountains.”(“My people” is a free translation of the personal pronoun that the NASB simply renders “them.”)

26 – 27 The prophetic word here enunciates an important general principle that has been demonstrated so strikingly in the downfall of Assyria: God is sovereign over human history (v.26). All nations will have to submit to his judgment.This important theological principle will be seen in relation to other nations — both small and great — in the oracles that follow. God is not like a man who makes plans and finds he has no power to put them into effect. Perfect wisdom and absolute power find their unity in God.

C. Prophecy against Philistia (14:28 – 32)

28 This oracle came in the year King Ahaz died:
29 Do not rejoice, all you Philistines,
that the rod that struck you is broken;
from the root of that snake will spring up a viper,
its fruit will be a darting, venomous serpent.
30 The poorest of the poor will find pasture,
and the needy will lie down in safety.
But your root I will destroy by famine;
it will slay your survivors.
31 Wail, O gate! Howl, O city!
Melt away, all you Philistines!
A cloud of smoke comes from the north,
and there is not a straggler in its ranks.
32 What answer shall be given
to the envoys of that nation?
“The LORD has established Zion,
and in her his affl icted people will find refuge.”

COMMENTARY

28 There is much uncertainty about the date of the death of Ahaz (see Introduction, p. 437).The Assyrian monarch whose death is implied in vv.29 – 30 could be Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser V, or Sargon II. It makes no real difference to the significance of the oracle.

29 – 30 Earlier commentators often identified the broken rod as Israel or the Davidic dynasty, and Motyer (1993, in loc.) says, “Up to the time of Ahaz, David’s kingdom, whatever its vicissitudes, had remained a sovereign state, but by the time of Ahaz’s death his policies had resulted in vassalage to Assyria.” This identification is certainly possible;however, because of the reference to the north the broken rod is probably an Assyrian king, on the assumption, of course, that v.31 does not introduce a different threat to Philistia.The rod could be Tiglath-Pileser III, with Shalmanezer, Sargon, and Sennacherib as the reptiles.

The succession of more and more dangerous reptiles suggests the intensification of aggression and danger. The death of a cruel, oppressive

monarch is a cause of rejoicing for his subjects, but such celebration is often premature, for that monarch's aggressiveness may characterize his whole dynasty. Seitz (in loc.), however, thinks that what is in view in this imagery is in fact the emergence of Babylon as an even more terrible foe than Assyria.This is difficult either to prove or disprove, and, in view of the dominance of Assyria in Isaiah's own day, I will assume that it is this enemy that is in view here.

The prophet's inspired imagination combined two sets of images here. After the reptilian series, the Assyrian monarchs are likened to the succession of root, shoot, and fruit in a plant. In this way the Spirit uses the natural gift of a deeply poetic imagination to convey prophetic truth vividly and powerfully.

Clearly, in the light of v.32, the focus of attention has moved briefly in v.30a from Philistia to Zion.The godliness of the poor and needy and the certainty that God is their helper are often presupposed in the OT (10:2; 11:4; cf. Ps 72:13; Am 4:1), for the integrity of the godly is rarely profitable in worldly terms. Here God assumes the role of a shepherd to his people (cf. 40:11). The destiny of Philistia is portrayed in stark contrast to this, for famine instead of fresh pasture will be its lot. Leaf, branch, or stem may wither and yet the plant can survive, but what hope is there when the root has been destroyed?

31 O. Kaiser (in loc.) says:

> What is one day to happen is as though present to the seer. Thus he already calls upon the gates and city to raise a cry of lamentation because they will be overpowered by the imminent attack. .. .The gate . . . must wail, because the savage mob of the enemy will pour through it into the conquered city. .. . We cannot tell whether the seer was thinking of the watch-fires, signal fires, or what would certainly have produced the most terrifying impression, the clouds of smoke billowing high into the sky from the burning of conquered cities.

32 The LXX refers only to the nations and not to their envoys, and a number of textual emendations of this verse have been suggested (see the note in Wildberger, in loc.): "Since there is so much uncertainty about all these alterations and expansions to restore the text, one does best to stay with the original textual reading, so as not to allow oneself to be led to a faulty conclusion from the outset." What a pity this principle has not been more often followed!

No doubt these envoys were Philistine diplomats sent to Jerusalem to encourage solidarity against the common Assyrian foe. As elsewhere, Isaiah's message encouraged trust in God, not in alliances (cf.7:1 – 9; 8:11 – 15), and it is strengthened by the fact that "the LORD" is emphatic here. We may therefore render as follows: "It is the LORD himself who has established Zion." The word for the envoys is strikingly similar to the great affirmations of faith in Psalm 46.

NOTES

29 שָׂרָף מְעוֹפֵף (*śārāp mᵉʿôpēp*, "a darting, venomous serpent") may refer to some dragon of popular fancy, but not necessarily. Any swift-moving reptile with a lethal bite or sting would fit the description. In either case the expression brings the series to a climax.

31 The MT's בּוֹדֵד (*bôdēd*, "straggler") is represented by מוֹדֵד (*môdēd*, "measure") in 1QIsa. The latter suggests that this great army was beyond counting, but either makes good sense.

D. Prophecy against Moab (15:1 – 16:14)

OVERVIEW

Blenkinsopp, 297, says that the two oracular poems here give an impression shared by practically all commentators “that the poems lack originality, that they are a work of *bricolage* put together out of bits of traditional prophetic material.” But are they really? If great poetry is graphic, imaginative, and the expression of deep feeling, what we have here is such literature. Not only so, but ch. 16 in particular is full of apt and vivid metaphors and similes. In fact these chapters have special features that constitute them together as one of the most moving and yet most enigmatic of Isaiah’s prophecies.

The inspired poet-prophet presents us with graphic pictures of judgment on Moab, sketching them often in the briefest of phrases. What makes it so memorable, however, is not so much its appeal to the eye of the imagination as to the inward ear.Through its verses the anguished wailing of the bereaved and the fugitives touches the reader’s heart.One is reminded of the justice of the judgment; for the godly in every age must take the side of God in his righteous acts of judgment, but the reader is not forbidden to mourn at the consequences of the people’s sins. And to his utter astonishment, he discovers that the inspired page is wet too with the tears of the prophet himself. Jeremiah wept for Judah (Jer 9:1), but Isaiah for Moab!

1 An oracle concerning Moab:
Ar in Moab is ruined,
destroyed in a night!
Kir in Moab is ruined,
destroyed in a night!
2 Dibon goes up to its temple,
to its high places to weep;
Moab wails over Nebo and Medeba.
Every head is shaved and every beard cut off.
3 In the streets they wear sackcloth;
on the roofs and in the public squares
they all wail,
prostrate with weeping.

4 Heshbon and Elealeh cry out,
their voices are heard all the way to Jahaz.
Therefore the armed men of Moab cry out,
and their hearts are faint.
5 My heart cries out over Moab;
her fugitives flee as far as Zoar,
as far as Eglath Shelishiyah.
They go up the way to Luhith,
weeping as they go;
on the road to Horonaim
they lament their destruction.
6 The waters of Nimrim are dried up
and the grass is withered;
the vegetation is gone
and nothing green is left.
7 So the wealth they have acquired and stored up
they carry away over the Ravine of the Poplars.
8 Their outcry echoes along the border of Moab;
their wailing reaches as far as Eglaim,
their lamentation as far as Beer Elim.
9 Dimon's waters are full of blood,
but I will bring still more upon Dimon —
a lion upon the fugitives of Moab
and upon those who remain in the land.
16:1 Send lambs as tribute
to the ruler of the land,
from Sela, across the desert,
to the mount of the Daughter of Zion.
2 Like fl uttering birds
pushed from the nest,
so are the women of Moab
at the fords of the Arnon.
3 "Give us counsel,
render a decision.
Make your shadow like night —
at high noon.
Hide the fugitives,
do not betray the refugees.
4 Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you;
be their shelter from the destroyer."
The oppressor will come to an end,
and destruction will cease;
the aggressor will vanish from the land.
5 In love a throne will be established;
in faithfulness a man will sit on it —
one from the house of David —

one who in judging seeks justice
and speeds the cause of righteousness.

6 We have heard of Moab's pride —
her overweening pride and conceit,
her pride and her insolence —
but her boasts are empty.

7 Therefore the Moabites wail,
they wail together for Moab.
Lament and grieve
for the men of Kir Hareseth.

8 The fields of Heshbon wither,
the vines of Sibmah also.
The rulers of the nations
have trampled down the choicest vines,
which once reached Jazer
and spread toward the desert.
Their shoots spread out
and went as far as the sea.

9 So I weep, as Jazer weeps,
for the vines of Sibmah.
O Heshbon, O Elealeh,
I drench you with tears!
The shouts of joy over your ripened fruit
and over your harvests have been stilled.

10 Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards;
no one sings or shouts in the vineyards;
no one treads out wine at the presses,
for I have put an end to the shouting.

11 My heart laments for Moab like a harp,
my inmost being for Kir Hareseth.

12 When Moab appears at her high place,
she only wears herself out;
when she goes to her shrine to pray,
it is to no avail.

13 This is the word the LORD has already spoken concerning Moab. 14 But now the LORD says:"Within three years, as a servant bound by contract would count them, Moab's splendor and all her many people will be despised, and her survivors will be very few and feeble."

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 This small nation is often mentioned in the OT, either on its own or with its near neighbor, Ammon. The origin of both is traced to Lot's incest (Ge 19:30 – 38). It is impossible to determine the exact historical circumstances of this

oracle or even to identify the enemy; it could have been Assyria or some incursive force of hungry and rapacious nomads from the desert. It could have been Israel (cf. 2Ki 14:25) or even Judah, though this last seems unlikely. This means that the prophecies here cannot be dated with certainty. Motyer (1993, in loc.) warns us against becoming too date-conscious and insufficiently theme-conscious.

Isaiah is fond of crowding a number of place names into a small compass (10:28 – 32; cf. 23:1 – 3;43:3). All the places mentioned here are in Moab.O. Kaiser (in loc.) dubs vv.1 – 9 “the night raid upon Moab and its consequences.” This certainly suits the situation described in v.1. The enemies no doubt have come unheralded. Their predatory purpose fulfilled, they have probably departed as suddenly as they came. Behind them is a trail of death and destruction. The land is full of weeping people, some gathering at religious shrines to cry to their gods, others in public places to join in corporate displays of weeping. Widyapranawa (in loc.) comments that in this short pericope nine places are mentioned and six verbs denote their weeping. The sounds of such agonized wailing would strike the men of Moab’s fighting force with a demoralizing terror.

5 – 9 Clements (in loc.) is surely correct when he rejects O. Kaiser’s view that the assurance the prophet gives us that he is deeply moved by the fate of the Moabites is a mere stylistic device to underline how severe is Moab’s pain, rather than an expression of real feeling. Blenkinsopp (in loc.) too uses the phrase, “a mock lament,” and writes of “the author’s real, or, more likely, simulated emotional response.” It is not at all clear that this passage is ironic, and we need to take its wider context into account, including ch. 19.

The emotional content of the present oracle may seem unique, but Isaiah 19 also shows the divine purpose of grace embracing Gentile nations whose record against Israel was far worse than that of Moab. Motyer (1999, in loc.) sees the grief as God’s rather than the prophet’s because of the way “my heart” in v.5 is matched by “I will bring” in v.9, although of course, as we see particularly in Hosea, there was often an identification of outlook and concern between God and his prophet.

None of the place names in these verses can be identified with certainty apart

from Zoar (v.5), which is at the southeastern tip of the Dead Sea. It looks as though the general direction of flight for most of the fugitives is southward to Edom. The reference to “the waters of Nimrim” (v.6) seems to suggest that they are the center of a normally fertile area. Perhaps they pass it during the dry season and see its withered vegetation as a symbol of their own condition (cf. Ps 84:6).

The Moabites are warned that there is no hope of alleviation. This may only have been a night raid, but it is devastating and an earnest of further acts of divine judgment. The reference to the enemy as a lion (v.9) reminds us of its use of Assyria in Amos 3:12. Some have treated the present reference as textual corruption, but Oswalt (in loc.),pointing out the similarity to Amos 5:19, says,“The prophet here could be saying that running may not give any more security than staying behind. To strike out across the wilderness may deliver you *from* an army but *unto* a ravening animal. There is no security in our own efforts.” We are reminded that Amos and Isaiah are near contemporaries and that both come from Judah, where there is lion-infested country.

We can keep this deeply emotional passage in perspective only if we remember that what it describes is an act of God. This deepens our wonderment at the tears of the prophet. In the NT the provision of propitiation by God’s love is all-the-more wonderful in the light of the demands of his holiness.

16:1 – 5 The prophetic searchlight, having exposed to view the whole land of Moab with its ruined cities and fleeing, homeless people, now becomes a spotlight. It concentrates first on the city of Sela (v.1), the source of the message of vv.3 – 4a, and then on the fords of Arnon (v.2), where the Moabite refugees, who are the subjects of the message, gather. Sela, normally Edomite, is apparently in Moabite hands at this time and may even have been the seat of its government.

Moab was famous for its great flocks of sheep.The Moabite rulers, in desperation, send lambs in recognition of the king of Judah’s overlordship in order to support their appeal for asylum for their refugees, many of whom — as in every such situation — are women with children. How graphically the prophet describes their frenzied endeavors to reach safety without harm (v.2)! The shadow (v.3) may well picture Judah as affording protection, like a great rock,

from the merciless midday sun (cf.32:2); but it is also possible that it further develops the analogy of the fluttering young birds. These would be easy prey for a predator on the ground unless the shadow of the parent bird falls protect-ingly across them in their movement toward the earth.

Verses 4b – 5 are probably the reply sent from Jerusalem to Sela. This passage resembles 14:32 in its triumphant assertion that Jerusalem is a place of security in the purpose of God. Some commentators, however, have understood these verses as continuing the message from Moab to Judah with a virtual promise that Moab will accept the overlord-ship of the house of David. This latter interpretation is more plausible if the RSV is followed; it renders the verses, "When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples under foot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love." Neither rendering does violence to the Hebrew.The comparison with 14:32 makes the former interpretation more likely, for this is the theology of the prophets of Judah, not of Moab.

If the words are addressed from Judah to Moab — or even if they are the prophet's parenthetical assurance to his own people — they are most naturally understood along messianic lines (cf.55:3). In fact they have even been viewed (by some who have reservations about messianic interpretations of other passages in Isaiah) as the most unambiguously messianic verses in the whole book. The love and faithfulness referred to are in the heart of God and come to his people on the basis of his promise, such as those of 2 Sam uel 7:12 – 16.

The language reminds us somewhat of 9:7 and perhaps expounds the fact that there will be no end to the "increase" of the Messiah's government and peace. His righteous government will embrace both Judah and Moab. At one time Moab and Mid-ian were allied against Israel (Nu 22:4; 25:1 – 18).Interestingly, the prophet presents the Messiah's rule as extending over both Midian (Isa 9:4 – 7) and Moab (here). See also the description of the Messiah's reign of righteous ness, faithfulness, and peace in 11:1 – 9.

6 – 7 These verses contain the only clear references to the sin of Moab. They save the compassion of this oracle from becoming sentimentalism. Mere sentiment may overlook sin, but true divine compassion does not. A true prophet is expected to penetrate beyond the misery that results from God's judgment to

the offenses against him that have caused it, and this Isaiah does here. As is so often the case in this book, pride causes the fire of God's wrath to burn (v.6; cf. 2:11 – 18, 3:16 – 24). Because of pride the Moabites are brought to this sorry pass.Some commentators take this as the Moabite plea for her refugees, but the text does not necessarily imply this.

8 – 12 Once again the atmosphere of lamentation dominates the prophecy. The prophet visualizes the land of Moab as a vast vineyard, with vines spreading to its farthest corners but now trampled underfoot by its enemies (v.8). This passage is particularly reminiscent of the parable of the vineyard (5:1 – 7). In both passages the figurative element is strong, but the earlier oracle lays special emphasis on God's care for the vineyard and also on the disappointing fruitage. The distinctive features of the parable remind us that Israel, as God's people, is in a special category; but the common elements of the two passages underline the fact that sin always earns judgment.

In an agricultural community, harvest is a season of great joy (cf. 9:3). In Moab, however, the vineyards will be silent (vv.9 – 10). The ripened fruit will not be trodden under foot in the winepresses, for judgment through foreign rulers stalks the land.

Once more (cf. 15:5) the prophet's heart is deeply moved by the undoubtedly deserved sufferings of the Moabites (v.11). The skilled and sensitive musician knows what instrument will best carry the feelings of his song to the heart of his hearers, and Isaiah's deep emotions come from the depths of his being with all the pathos of a lament played on a harp. Unhappily, Moab's sufferings have not driven her to the true and living God but to the idol shrines of her god Chemosh. There can be no help from such a source (v.12).

13 – 14 There had been earlier prophecies against Moab with the same general import as the oracle just given here (cf. Am 2:1 – 3). Perhaps this is what v.13 means. Alternatively, vv.13 – 14 may have been given to Isaiah at a later time than the bulk of chs. 15 – 16, to which this verse would then apply. We cannot be certain. What is sure is that Isaiah has a specific disclosure from the Lord as to the time of Moab's judgment. It seems likely — especially in view of the similarity between these verses and 21:16 – 17 — that the prophecy relates to the campaign of Sargon against the tribal peoples of northwest Arabia, for the

Assyrian army's route would most naturally go through Moab. This would date the two closing verses of ch. 16 around 718 BC.

Verse 14 refers either to the contract of a laborer with his master (cf. Ge 29:18; Lev 25:50, 53) or one between a mercenary soldier and his superior. In either case the point is the same, for the exact calculation of the period is important to the transaction. The prophetic ministry does not require many such timed predictions (though another occurs in 7:8). Their fulfillment will, of course, provide additional clear evidence of their authenticity.

NOTES

1 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see the Note at 13:1.Ar seems to have been the capital city of Moab (cf. Nu 21:15, 26; Dt 2:9, 18, 29) on the river Arnon, though some have taken it here to be a general reference to the country as a whole. Likewise, Kir (קִיר *qîr*, "walled place" and so "city"), "may refer not to a particular city but to the cities of Moab in general"(O. Kaiser, in loc.). But it could be identical with Kir Hareseth (cf. Note on 16:7).

2 The Hebrew at the beginning of this verse is difficult, for עָלָה הַבַּיִת וְדִיבֹן (*ʿālâ habbayit wᵉdîbōn*) really means "the house goes up, and Dibon." Some have taken בַּיִת to be itself a place name, perhaps in some garbled form, while others, including the RSV, amend it to tB/ (*bat*, "daughter"; cf. Note on 1:8).The NIV takes the house to be a temple and assumes the omission of a Hebrew particle or else a somewhat irregular construction. Dibon is just north of the Arnon; Nebo and Medeba are farther north still. For Nebo, see Deuteronomy 34:1.

4 Heshbon and Elealeh were also north of the Arnon, while the location of Jahaz (cf. Jos 21:36) is less certain. The first two were outside the Moabite heartland but were in Moabite hands at the time of the oracle.

5 Zoar was near the southeastern corner of the Dead Sea (cf. Ge 13:10; 14:2; 19:22), on the way out of Moab to Edom.

עֶגְלַת שְׁלִשִׁיָה (*ʿeglat Šlišîyâ*, "Eglath Shelishiyah") is translated in the KJV (following the

LXX) as “a heifer of three years,” but it is difficult to make sense of this, and most commentators take it to be a place name. Its location is unknown. For the other place names in this and the following verse, see W.Schottroff,“Horonaim, Nimrim, Luhith und der Westrand des ‘Landes Ataroth,’ ” *ZDPV* 82 (1966): 180ff.;also *ZPEB* under the various names. It seems that the refugees are here pictured as hurrying southward and southwestward into Edom and perhaps toward southern Judah.

7 נַחַל הָעֲרָבִים (*naḥal hāʿărābîm,*“the Ravine of the Poplars”) is probably the Wadi el Hesa, dividing Moab and Edom from each other.

8 Eglaim and Beer Elim cannot be located with full confidence, but the modern sites they are usually identified with are in the Moabite heartland and nearer the Arnon than the border with Edom. The language of this verse leads us to anticipate sites geographically remote from Nimrim in v.6. (See *ZPEB*, 1:506; 2:224.)

9 The MT, DSS, some LXX manuscripts, and the Vulgate render “Dimon” as “Dibon,” perhaps conforming it to v.2, though Jerome, the Vulgate’s translator, says it was an alternative name for Dibon in his day. However, a different location is not impossible, though identification can only be conjectural.

16:2 The Arnon was the traditional northern boundary of Moab, but some of the places in chs. 15 – 16 were north of it and were in Moabite hands at the time.

5 The phrase אֹהֶל דָּוִד (*ʾōhel dāwîd,*“ “house of David”; NIV mg., “tent of David”) is reminiscent of Amos 9:11 (though the Hebrew is different) and may show the influence of the earlier prophet on Isaiah (see Introduction). See the comment on Isaiah 15:9.

7 “The men of Kir Hareseth” assumes G. R. Driver’s view (“Notes on Isaiah,” *ZAW* 77 [1958]:42 – 48) that the words translated “the raisin-cakes of Kir-hareseth” in the RSV constitute picturesque language for “luxurious dwellers in Kir Hareseth.” Kir is the same as in 15:1, if that is a city. See the Note above.

8 – 9 Sibmah was close to Heshbon (cf. 15:4 for both Heshbon and Elealeh),

and its vines may well have been particularly fine and well known. Jazer is farther north still and is mentioned to show, with “the desert” and “the sea,” how far its vines extended. This is, of course, hyperbole.

11 For Kir Hareseth, see Note at v.7.

E. Prophecy against Damascus (and Ephraim) (17:1 – 14)

OVERVIEW

The heading of ch. 17 seems to apply to the whole of it; yet there is much here that relates to Israel rather than to Syria and its capital city, Damascus. This need cause no real problems, for Isaiah 7 – 8 deals with a combined Syro-Ephraimite threat to Judah. If two nations are locked together in an alliance with common political and military goals, they could well furnish the subject for one oracle. Ephraim's devotion to the apostate shrines at Bethel and Dan made her a perpetual rebel against the Lord, but now she became unequally yoked with a pagan nation in an endeavor to coerce Judah into an unholy league against Assyria. This oracle, therefore, appears to belong to the period 735 – 732 BC (see Introduction, p. 437).

1 An oracle concerning Damascus:
"See, Damascus will no longer be a city
but will become a heap of ruins.
2 The cities of Aroer will be deserted
and left to flocks, which will lie down,
with no one to make them afraid.
3 The fortified city will disappear from Ephraim,
and royal power from Damascus;
the remnant of Aram will be
like the glory of the Israelites,"
declares the LORD Almighty.
4 "In that day the glory of Jacob will fade;
the fat of his body will waste away.
5 It will be as when a reaper gathers the standing grain
and harvests the grain with his arm —
as when a man gleans heads of grain
in the Valley of Rephaim.
6 Yet some gleanings will remain,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
leaving two or three olives on the topmost branches,
four or five on the fruitful boughs,"
declares the LORD, the God of Israel.
7 In that day men will look to their Maker

and turn their eyes to the Holy One of Israel.

8 They will not look to the altars,
the work of their hands,
and they will have no regard for the Asherah poles
and the incense altars their fingers have made.

9 In that day their strong cities, which they left because of the Israelites, will be like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth. And all will be desolation.

10 You have forgotten God your Savior;
you have not remembered the Rock, your fortress.
Therefore, though you set out the finest plants
and plant imported vines,

11 though on the day you set them out, you make them grow,
and on the morning when you plant them, you bring them to bud,
yet the harvest will be as nothing
in the day of disease and incurable pain.

12 Oh, the raging of many nations —
they rage like the raging sea!
Oh, the uproar of the peoples —
they roar like the roaring of great waters!

13 Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters,
when he rebukes them they flee far away,
driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,
like tumbleweed before a gale.

14 In the evening, sudden terror!
Before the morning, they are gone!
This is the portion of those who loot us,
the lot of those who plunder us.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 This oracle starts with a call to visualize what God will make of a once-proud city (v.1; cf.5:7; 25:2). The downfall of Damascus will be no isolated event, for other cities too will be deserted (v.2). The double conjunction of Ephraim and Damascus and then of Aram and the Israelites is striking (v.3). Israel chose a close link with Damascus, so she had to accept the consequences. A shared purpose involves a shared judgment. The basis of this league was chiefly military; and, ironically, it is in military terms that she will suffer, in the loss of her “fortified city.” This is no doubt a reference to Damascus, the fortress Ephraim hopes will protect her from the Assyrians.

The prophet’s reference to the remnant of Aram may point to petty Aramean

states that have taken shelter under the kingdom that has its capital at Damascus, or it may relate to that kingdom itself.The poetic parallelism favors the latter. Damascus fell to the Assyrians in 732 BC and Samaria, Israel's capital, a decade later.The instrument of these judgments was Assyria, but they showed the great power of "the LORD Almighty" (see comment on 1:9).

4 – 6 The repeated phrase "in that day" (v.4; cf.vv.7, 9) underlines the decisiveness of the Lord's judgment on Ephraim. It has an eschatological quality (see Note on 2:11), not necessarily that the events described belong to the period when God's purposes will be consummated, but because in these events the great principles of that period will cast their shadows before them. So then in such judgments God is making an emphatic point about sin and his attitude toward it.

The judgment on Ephraim is to be devastating, leaving the people decimated, a remnant so weak and small as apparently of no account. The "glory of Jacob" (v.4; cf. v.3) suggests Ephraim's honor, the respect in which others hold him. He will become subject to a wasting disease, making him a sorry sight, as though he has been subject to a terrible beating (cf. 1:5 – 6; 52:14).

As in 1:5 – 9 the picture of a body politic suffering the consequences of sin gave place to one drawn from the harvest, so it is here (v.5), though the Spirit-controlled imagination of the prophet now develops it in a somewhat different way. At harvest-time the reaper's arm encircles and makes taut many stalks of grain so that he can remove their heads by one sweep of his sickle. Fruit trees also will be climbed as far as possible and beaten to gather the great bulk of their fruit (v.6). In each case the farmer endeavors to leave as little as possible for the gleaners, who are allowed by the law to gather anything edible that had been missed (Dt 24:19 – 22). So thorough will judgment be, yet the destruction will not be total.The phrases "the glory of Jacob" and "the God of Israel" at the beginning and the end of this section are reminders that the God of the patriarchal promises has an ongoing purpose beyond temporal judgment (cf. 6:11 – 13).

7 – 8 The judgment on Ephraim will bring a spirit of penitence to at least some of the survivors. The contrast between "their Maker" (v.7) and "the work of their hands" (v.8) can hardly be other than deliberate, and it reminds us of 46:1 – 7. Nothing is more misguided or pathetic than attempts to mend the

relationship with God by the work of human hands. We are all the children of Adam, whose hand took the forbidden fruit, and our own hands are defiled. Such hands cannot construct a way to God.

The altars mentioned here may be those of the apostate Yahweh shrines with their forbidden bull images at Bethel and Dan, as Mauchline (in loc.) argues: “The return here is to the Holy One of Israel; they no longer pay any respect to forms and images which they have made with their own hands, which means they gave heed to the Second Commandment.” Perhaps we should read v.8a in the light of v.8b, for “the Asherah poles” (which the NIV margin correctly explains as “symbols of the goddess Asherah”) reflect Canaan’s naked paganism.The presence of northern Israelites at Hezekiah’s celebration of the Passover (2Ch 30) shows the fulfillment of this prediction.

9 – 11 The theme of judgment returns. Verse 9 is difficult to translate. The Note below takes the matter up in more detail, but the main sense is clear. When Israel came into Canaan many years before, the strong cities were abandoned to them.At that time the Lord was at work for his people, giving them the Land of Promise. The situation has changed, however, and the same cities will be abandoned by the Israelites as they are under the judging hand of God. Here again we see “the Light of Israel”becoming a fire (cf. 10:17 and comments there).

Isaiah has a God-given sense of appropriateness in his choice of titles for God. God is sovereignly using human means to a divine end, so he is “the LORD Almighty” (v.3); he is judging his own people and yet ensuring that his purposes for them will survive that judgment, so he is “the LORD , the God of Israel” (v.6); he is turning them away from idolatry to a new faithfulness toward him, so he is “the Holy One of Israel” (v.7); and he is reminding them of his mighty acts of salvation when he brought them at first into the land of Canaan, so he is “God [their] Savior” (v.10; cf. 12:2 – 3; 33:2; 61:10;62:11). Their God is also called “the Rock, your fortress,” and this — together with the accusation of ungrateful forgetfulness — recalls Deuteronomy (cf.Dt 5:15; 7:18; 8:2; 31:4, 15, 18) and the lessons of God’s gracious acts of deliverance at the beginning of his people’s history as a nation.

Verses 10b – 11 have been understood in two different ways. The NIV sees

them as a further development of the illustrations of judgment given in vv.4 – 6. Judgment is like a thorough harvest that leaves only scattered gleanings, but it can also be pictured as disappointing in itself; for even the finest plants, which the grower has searched out in foreign lands and planted in ideal conditions, may come to nothing. Some kind of pestilence is the implied figure of judgment here.

The alternative interpretation, which goes back to Cheyne (see Notes), seems to be assumed in the NASB, where the NIV's "plant imported vines"becomes "set them with vine slips of a strange *god* ,"perhaps an allusion here to the cult of Adonis or Tammuz. This was a fertility cult in which plant cuttings were grown rapidly, probably by using the best horticultural techniques known at the time. By sympathetic magic the special qualities of the plants were then believed to pass to those who grew them.This understanding of the text is possible, though it does imply that a word for god is the understood noun of which זר (NASB, "strange"; NIV, "imported") is the attributive. It would also follow well from v.8 with its references to paganism.

12 – 14 No sooner has the reader's mind taken in the significance of one picture than Isaiah presents another equally vivid. Mauchline (in loc.) says, "*The thunder of many peoples* amassing, reminding us of the opening of Psalm 2, refers generally to the nations, such as Syria and Ephraim (7:1 ff.) or Assyria (10:5 – 11), which muster their war-hosts and try, God disregarding, to carry out their plans and satisfy their ambitions" (emphasis his).He is probably correct, for the language seems too general to be restricted to Assyria, though this may be chiefly in view (cf. 8:7). The general nature of the picture is underlined by the implied comparison with God's creation ordinance restricting the flow of the waters across the face of the earth (cf.Ge 1:9 and esp. Ps 104:5 – 9). The God who rules both nature and history uses language taken from his control of the one to give graphic representation to his control of the other.

The imagery changes again. The Palestinian farming culture that has already provided illustrations in this oracle — as in many others in Isaiah — returns. The foes are like great rushing torrents (vv.12 – 13), but God opposes their waters by his wind (a possible allusion to Ex 14:21), and they become like chaff blown from the hilltop threshing floor (cf. Pss 1:4; 83:13; Isa 29:5) or like mere dust (cf. Isa 40:15) driven in its blinding grittiness before the advancing storm. The NASB translates *galgal* as "whirling dust," but the NIV's "tumbleweed" is also possible, for the word simply means "something that rolls." If the latter is

correct, Oswalt's comment (in loc.) is apt when he says of the chaff and tumbleweed:

> Both of these are lifeless and both are compelled by a force outside themselves. Moreover both are without significance. Their coming and going are of no importance. So those who are enabled to see the events of the world from God's perspective need not be troubled by the mighty conquerors who tread the earth's stage.

A new thought enters this section of the oracle at v.14. Not only will God's judgment of his people's enemies be decisive, it will also be swift.The NIV uses eleven words to present the graphic contrast (v.14a); the Hebrew does it in only seven.The view at dusk is presented simply in terms of the overpowering emotion of terror, the prophet leaving the imagination of his hearers to people the scene with countless hosts of pagan soldiers eager for their prey. In the morning it must all have seemed like a nightmare, for there is not an enemy to be seen! There can be little doubt that God's action against Sennacherib's great army (37:36) is in view here.

The prophet closes with a general comment based on this singular example of God's care for his people and his city. "This is the portion of those who loot us, the lot of those who plunder us." The oracle opened with Damascus, moved on to deal with Ephraim, but at the end it appears all these events are clearly part of God's plan to keep in safety those in Jerusalem — implied but never mentioned — and in the center of his purpose because his people are trusting in him.

NOTES

1 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*,"oracle"), see the Note at 13:1.

2 עָרֵי עֲרֹעֵר (*ʿārê ʿărōʿēr*, "the cities of Aroer") are not easy to identify. There was a city of that name on the Arnon River (Dt 2:36) and another near Rabbath-Ammon (Jos 13:25), both probably in Isaiah's day in the territory governed by Moab, not Damascus. Some commentators assume this verse has been misplaced from the preceding oracle against Moab; others follow the Targum. It seems to mean "juniper thicket," and there may well have been other places so called. As can be easily seen, the place name is rather like a reduplicated version of the common

noun, so dittography cannot be ruled out (see Wildberger, in loc.).

5 The NIV assumes the vocalization קֹצֵר (qōṣēr, "reaper") instead of קָצִיר (qāṣîr, "harvest") here. A small change in the pointing is surely preferable to Wildberger's suggestion of a gloss. TheValley of Rephaim was close to Jerusalem, to the southwest.

9 The RSV follows the LXX in translating, "like the deserted places of the Hivites and the Amorites,"instead of, "like places abandoned to thickets and undergrowth." If this were correct, it would make explicit a parallel with the Israelite conquest of the land that is already implicit (see comment above), but the MT makes adequate sense as it stands and seems authentically Isaianic (cf., e.g., 7:23 – 25).

10 The Adonis cult theory first put forward by Cheyne is discussed by G. Fohrer (*Das Buch Jesaya* , Band II [Zurich – Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1962], in loc.) and R. de Vaux ("The Cults of Adonis and Osiris,"*The Bible and the Ancient Near East* [London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1971], 210ff.) and in most recent commentaries. The Adonis cult is known to us from classical sources and was indigenous to Syria, so that a reference to it would be appropriate in this oracle. This deity was also called Tammuz (cf. Eze 8:14), and flowers of rapid growth and death were used to represent his short life each spring and summer. The theory does not require emendation of the text and represents an interesting but unproved possibility.Kissane (in loc.), however, is right to remind us that the reference is general and not necessarily specific to any one cult.

12 – 14 See comments on 18:1 – 7.

F. Prophecy against Cush (18:1 – 7)

OVERVIEW

This oracle is unique in Isaiah 13 – 23 (except, of course, for ch. 20) in that it does not open with the word משא (“oracle”). Erlandsson, 74, notes that there is some kind of link with 17:12 – 14, which immediately precedes it, and many commentators treat the two passages as having virtually the same message, with 17:12 – 14 employing universal language and the present passage particularizing. Both open with the exclamation הוי translated “Oh” in 17:12 and “Woe” in 18:1. This word — whatever its exact significance — usually presages doom. The NASB’s “Alas” in both verses helps the reader to see the link between the passages, both of which seem to have chiefly in view the destruction of menacing Assyria.

Isaiah 17:12 – 14 appears to have natural links both with the earlier part of ch. 17 and with ch.18. Chapter 18 certainly seems a later oracle, but the arrangement of material, as so often in this book, shows a keen eye for structure. The passage’s content hardly seems to warrant the doom exclamation, for the doom is really pictured as falling on Assyria rather than on Cush, but it perhaps anticipates ch. 20, and chs. 18 – 20 may have been conceived as a unity, for they all deal with Egypt and Cush, which were one at this time. Alternatively, it may suggest an eschatological fulfillment, not simply a historical one.

Biblical Cush is usually translated “Ethiopia,”but the NIV has wisely chosen transliteration, not translation; for the term designates an area much larger than present-day Ethiopia, including both the Sudan and Somalia. This somewhat mysterious area at the edge of the normal biblical world had come into the world of Isaiah’s day. Cush was usually in Egypt’s area of control or at least of influence, but for a period during the eighth century Egypt was ruled by an Ethiopian dynasty. The visit of the ambassadors could be placed either during the Philistine revolt against Assyria (around 712 BC) or in the period of restlessness after the death of Sargon in 705 (see Introduction, p. 437). Most commentators have difficulty deciding between the two, and it really matters little.

1 Woe to the land of whirring wings
along the rivers of Cush,
2 which sends envoys by sea
in papyrus boats over the water.
Go, swift messengers,
to a people tall and smooth-skinned,
to a people feared far and wide,
an aggressive nation of strange speech,
whose land is divided by rivers.
3 All you people of the world,
you who live on the earth,
when a banner is raised on the mountains,
you will see it,
and when a trumpet sounds,
you will hear it.
4 This is what the LORD says to me:
"I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place,
like shimmering heat in the sunshine,
like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest."
5 For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone
and the flower becomes a ripening grape,
he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives,
and cut down and take away the spreading branches.
6 They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey
and to the wild animals;
the birds will feed on them all summer,
the wild animals all winter.
7 At that time gifts will be brought to the LORD Almighty
from a people tall and smooth-skinned,
from a people feared far and wide,
an aggressive nation of strange speech,
whose land is divided by rivers —
the gifts will be brought to Mount Zion, the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 The phrase "the land of whirring wings"(v.1) is highly evocative for any hearer or reader who has been in the Nile Valley, with its swarms of insects. Onomatopoiea often gives greater power of persistence to a word, and there is a striking example of that here; for the Hebrew *ṣilṣal*("whirring"),as Skinner (in loc.) points out, is closely akin to the Galla word *ṣalṣalya*, used of the tsetse fly. The alternative translation "sailing ships" (see Note) is interesting, for, as Oswalt (in

loc.) points out, sailors have often used the term “wings” for a ship’s sails.Perhaps, then, we do not have to choose between two senses, for the prophet may be making a wordplay here, representing the busy traffic of sailing ships going down the Nile as like the noisy activity of the insects that infested it.

Ambassadors in OT days were not permanent officials placed by nations in the capital cities of friendly states; rather, they were emissaries sent out on special commissions. No doubt the purpose here was to foment rebellion against Assyria, which was very much in the interests of the rival power that straddled the Nile Valley. The lightness of their papyrus vessels (v.2) enabled them to be carried past rapids and other unnavigable stretches of rivers. The NIV’s “sea” literally translates *yām*, while the RSV interprets this word as the Nile. This may well be correct, for *yām* can be applied to a great river such as the Nile. It seems less likely that the envoys would travel up the Red Sea from an Ethiopian seaport, especially in such light craft.

The prophet gives charge to the ambassadors.They are to return with all speed to the land they have come from; for their mission, though politically expedient, is spiritually inappropriate and irrelevant, as the later verses of this chapter make clear. J. Skinner (in loc.) says:

> While the language breathes the courtly urbanity and respect due to distinguished strangers from a far country, we can easily read between the lines a firm rejection of their overtures. Jehovah, he says in effect, will crush the Assyrian in His own time without human help; and that signal judgment will be a demonstration to Ethiopia and all the world of His supreme Godhead.

Even Greeks such as Herodotus shared the general admiration felt in antiquity for the tall, handsome, clean-shaven Nubians of Cush. The military reputation they already possessed had been much enhanced by their recent conquest of mighty Egypt.Israel, remembering its own captivity in Egypt, may have been particularly impressed. Some commentators (e.g., Oswalt and Motyer), pointing out that “tall and smooth-skinned” might be better translated “long-standing and polished,” argue for a possibly wider application than to the Ethiopians, in keeping with the movement to a worldwide scene in v.3. Motyer (1993, in loc.), agreeing that the reference to “rivers” in v.1 supports the identification with Ethiopia, nevertheless goes on to say:

> Possibly, the translation should be less specific, *i.e.* ‘Go . .. to a/any nation of long standing and in

trim, to a/any people that is to be feared, whether near or far, an/any aggressive nation whose land rivers cross' (*i.e.* that is accessible by water). This makes the world-view explicit.

Certainly the actual message given to the envoys has universal application, for the whole world will reverberate at the trumpet blast heralding mighty Assyria's fall (v.3). The banner and the trumpet (addressing the eye and the ear) represent the call to rally for battle.

4 – 6 The NIV tends to omit conjunctions on stylistic grounds when they do not seem to add to the sense, but its omission of the opening "for" here is unfortunate, as the prophet is here explaining the basis of his message. Watts (in loc.) draws attention to the singular "me" in v.4, noting that similar passages occur in 21:2 – 4, 6, 10; 22:14, the last of which, he says, is identified in its context as the voice of Shebna, a high official at Hezekiah's court: "The solo passages in first person, not otherwise identified from 18:4 through chap. 22, are assigned to Shebna."This identification, however, is highly improbable, and Watts's treatment of 22:14 is most questionable.The language of revelation, of divine disclosure, is present in each passage, and there seems no reason to find any other "me" than the prophet himself.

Isaiah often urges his contemporaries to adopt an attitude of quiet faith in their God instead of trusting in alliances with other powers (e.g., 7:4; 30:15).Here it is God himself who is quiet, contemplating calmly the frenzied scene of diplomatic and military activity. When Isaiah commends quiet trust, therefore, he is really calling his hearers to view things from a divine viewpoint (cf. 2Pe 1:4). As Clements (in loc.) puts it, "The imagery of a calm and pleasant summer evening sums up the serene indifference of Yahweh to the Ethiopian plan." Barton too, 35, comments on "this memorable image . . . . All that is seen of God is a gentle shimmering, like a cloud of dew on a very hot day, but the haze hides intense activity and preparedness to strike."

The second simile of v.4 serves not only to reinforce the first by identical sense-rhythm but also prepares for the disclosure of God's judgment so vividly described in v.5. O. Kaiser (in loc.) provides clear information and argues that the divine harvester is here dealing not with the fruit-bearing branches but with those that reveal their barrenness by their emptiness (cf. Jn 15:2, 5). In such circumstances branches valueless to people are left to the local birds and animals, who put them to their own use (v.6).This suggests that the fierce

Assyrians will themselves become the prey of others.

Clements (in loc.) points out that the Hebrew word *zalzallîm*(“shoots”; v.5) “introduces an intentional homophony” on the word *ṣilṣal*(“whirring”;v.1). This is certainly possible, for the poet-prophet Isaiah is so sensitive to both the meaning and the sound of words.This suggests that Ethiopia, a similarly barren shoot, will itself fall under God’s judgment.

7 This verse is often regarded as a late addition to the oracle (see Wildberger, in loc.), but, as Watts (in loc.) says, the time reference with which it opens “most appropriately refers to the events envisioned in verses 3 – 6 and planned for in verses 1 – 2 to take place, that is, when Ethiopia and Assyria begin their campaign against lower Egypt.” Verses 6 – 7 anticipate the judgment-salvation theme of ch. 19. The very people who, from their position of strength, have sent word to Judah to secure her cooperation in a military venture will come again with gifts for the true God in Zion.

This picture (cf. 45:14; also Pss 68:31; 87:4; Zep 3:10) is a specific illustration of the general vision in passages such as 2:1 – 4 and 60:1 – 14, where Zion is the religious center of the whole world. Oswalt (in loc.), noting that the phrase “the place of the Name of the LORD Almighty” is often considered late because it reveals “Deuteronomic theology,”the rise of which is often dated around 650 BC, says that instead it should be reckoned as evidence against that whole hypothesis.

NOTES

1 The NEB renders צִלְצַל כְּנָפָיִם (*ṣilṣal kᵉnāpāyim*) as “sailing ships” instead of “whirring wings,” following the LXX and Targum. Driver (“Isaiah 1 – 39: Textual and Linguistic Problems,” *JSS* [1968]: 45; cf. Wildberger,in loc.) argues for this understanding of the phrase. But the usual translation presents no difficulties and is in line with the prophet’s vivid use of language; this sense is found also in Deuteronomy 24:42.

2 קַו קַו(*qaw qaw*), translated “of strange speech” in the NIV but “powerful” in

the NASB, is obscure (see comment on its use at 28:10). Clements (in loc.) takes it as “most probably an onomatopoeic expression for ‘foreign,’ unintelligible language.” The Greek βάρβαρος (*barbaros*, “barbarian”) provides a close comparison.

G. Prophecy against Egypt (19:1 – 25)

OVERVIEW

This oracle is of exceptional interest because of its amazing climax: the judgment of God on the Egyptians is followed by their repentance and conversion, by manifestations of God's grace to them, and by their incorporation in the people of God, along with their bitter enemy, Assyria, and the chosen people, Israel, who had suffered so grievously at the hands of both.

A substantial number of commentators, not all conservative, attribute vv.1 – 15 to Isaiah.The theme of these verses, after all, relates well to his message in other passages, warning Judah not to trust herself to an alliance with Egypt against the Assyrians (cf. 30:1 – 7; 31:1 – 3). It is otherwise, however, with vv.16 – 25, which have been widely denied to the eighth-century prophet. It is alleged in particular that vv.18 – 20 reflect later events, particularly the migration of Jews to Egypt — which was not substantial before Jeremiah's day — and the building of a Jewish temple there around 160 BC (see, e.g.,Clements and O. Kaiser, in loc.).

Erlandsson, by contrast, concentrates on the linguistic phenomena and general evidence of the complementary nature of the two main sections of the chapter. He calls for "greater care in the matter of assigning very late dates to pronouncements whose function is complementary"; he goes on to say, "One must not exclude the possibility that verses 16 – 25 were appended to the judgment oracle of verses 1 – 15 by the prophet himself or his closest disciples" (79 – 80).

While Erlandsson merely questions the late dating of these verses, Mauchline (in loc.) argues persuasively — this time largely on historical grounds — for their unity with the rest of the chapter. He asks, for example, "When . .. was Judah ever a terror to Egypt (v.17)?" and answers, "Certainly not in the sixth century and not at any time thereafter before the close of the prophetic canon of the Old Testament."He points out that the deliverance of Jerusalem from

Sennacherib in 701 must have seemed a divine deliverance:

> It was Yahweh triumphant over the mighty gods of Assyria. Egypt had sent an army into Palestine on that occasion and, according to the Assyrian record, it had been defeated at Eltekeh; therefore, themselves humiliated, the Egyptians could claim no share in the humiliation of the Assyrians. Surely there we have circumstances, within Isaiah's lifetime, which are better fitted than any other of later date to evoke the fear of Yahweh and of Judah expressed in verses 16f.

Verses 1 – 15 have been assigned to various dates during the latter part of the eighth century, but Mauchline's line of reasoning makes it seem more than likely that the whole chapter comes from the period of Sennacherib's invasion.

How Athanasius loved this chapter! He wrote *De Incarnatione* soon after the Edict of Milan, when the persecution of Chris tians for their faith came to an end within the Roman Empire. He lived and worked in Alexandria and evidently saw in this chapter a prophecy of the triumphs of the gospel of Christ in his native land. He writes:

> The thing is happening before our very eyes, here in Egypt; and thereby another prophecy is fulfilled, for at no other time have the Egyptians ceased from their false worship save when the Lord of all, riding as on a cloud, came down here in the body and brought the error of idols to nothing and won over everybody to Himself and through Himself to the Father. (*Saint Athanasius on the Incarnation* , trans. and ed. by a religious of C.S.M.V. [London:Mowbray, 1970], 65.)

1 An oracle concerning Egypt:
See, the LORD rides on a swift cloud
and is coming to Egypt.
The idols of Egypt tremble before him,
and the hearts of the Egyptians melt within them.
2 "I will stir up Egyptian against Egyptian —
brother will fight against brother,
neighbor against neighbor,
city against city,
kingdom against kingdom.
3 The Egyptians will lose heart,
and I will bring their plans to nothing;
they will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead,
the mediums and the spiritists.
4 I will hand the Egyptians over
to the power of a cruel master,
and a fierce king will rule over them,"
declares the Lord, the LORD Almighty.
5 The waters of the river will dry up,

and the riverbed will be parched and dry.

6 The canals will stink;
the streams of Egypt will dwindle and dry up.
The reeds and rushes will wither,

7 also the plants along the Nile,
at the mouth of the river.
Every sown field along the Nile
will become parched, will blow away and be no more.

8 The fishermen will groan and lament,
all who cast hooks into the Nile;
those who throw nets on the water
will pine away.

9 Those who work with combed flax will despair,
the weavers of fine linen will lose hope.

10 The workers in cloth will be dejected,
and all the wage earners will be sick at heart.

11 The officials of Zoan are nothing but fools;
the wise counselors of Pharaoh give senseless advice.
How can you say to Pharaoh,
"I am one of the wise men,
a disciple of the ancient kings"?

12 Where are your wise men now?
Let them show you and make known
what the LORD Almighty
has planned against Egypt.

13 The officials of Zoan have become fools,
the leaders of Memphis are deceived;
the cornerstones of her peoples
have led Egypt astray.

14 The LORD has poured into them
a spirit of dizziness;
they make Egypt stagger in all that she does,
as a drunkard staggers around in his vomit.

15 There is nothing Egypt can do —
head or tail, palm branch or reed.

16 In that day the Egyptians will be like women. They will shudder with fear at the uplifted hand that the LORD Almighty raises against them. 17 And the land of Judah will bring terror to the Egyptians; everyone to whom Judah is mentioned will be terrified, because of what the LORD Almighty is planning against them.

18 In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty. One of them will be called the City of Destruction.

19 In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the heart of Egypt, and a monument to the LORD at its border. 20 It will be a sign and witness to the LORD Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender,

and he will rescue them. 21 So the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and in that day they will acknowledge the LORD . They will worship with sacrifices and grain offerings; they will make vows to the LORD and keep them. 22 The LORD will strike Egypt with a plague; he will strike them and heal them. They will turn to the LORD, and he will respond to their pleas and heal them.

23 In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. 24 In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. 25 The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance."

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 In a graphic anthropomorphism, the Lord is pictured as riding on a swift cloud to Egypt (v.1).In Psalm 104:3, a psalm of creation, this imagery is applied to his revelation in nature, but it is more often applied to his activity as the divine warrior (see Note on 19:1). Could there be an implied comparison and contrast between the swiftness of the Cushite ambassadors traveling by water in 18:2 and the even greater swiftness of God himself, pictured as coming on the cloud? Perhaps.

Once before this, the God of Israel had judged Egypt's gods (Ex 12:12; Nu 33:4) as well as its people. His appearance on the heavenly horizon fills them both with dread. Their power to resist him is further diminished by internal division and internecine conflict. In fact, as Herodotus recorded, Egyptian unity — secured by the power of the Cushite dynasty — was destroyed by civil war, with twelve petty kingdoms (virtual city-states) arising until finally, in the mid-seventh century, some measure of unity was secured again under Psammetik I, but with acknowledgment of the overlordship of Assyria.

The reader knows that idols and the human agents of paganism can be of no avail to the Egyptians in their predicament, not only because of passages such as 2:20 – 22 and 8:19 – 22, but also because this oracle itself declares that both the Egyptians and their objects of worship will be overcome by fear (v.1). There is little point in the demoralized turning to the demoralized!

The fierce king of v.4 has been variously identified, and a decision between

the various candidates is not easy.The larger commentaries all debate the issue. Watts (in loc.), who thinks it must be an Ethiopian monarch, perhaps Shabaka, goes on to say, “If one breaks away from the contextual setting, almost any king that ever conquered Egypt will do.” Some opt for an Assyrian and certainly ferocity was a general characteristic of all the Assyrian monarchs, whose cruelty was proverbial. For this reason Kissane (in loc.) suggests that the reference here is not to a specific Assyrian monarch but simply indicates that Egypt will come under harsh Assyrian rule. Although the Egyptians do not realize it, their downfall before Assyria will mean the virtual end not only of their greatness but even of their independence for millennia. Who is this whose power is so great that he can hand over one mighty nation to another? Why, of course, “the Lord, the LORD Almighty”!

5 – 10 Stylistic variation is an outstanding feature of the book of Isaiah. Miscall, 57, points out the contrast between the plethora of words and images here and the brief statement about Moab’s aridity (15:6). This passage graphically portrays Egyptian economics, with the total dependence of its industry on the Nile. Dry up the Nile and, sooner or later, the whole Egyptian economy will grind to a halt. Who can — and will — do this, when the Nile was a great deity to the Egyptians as well as a great river? Why, the same God Almighty whose plans to intervene in Egypt’s history have been declared already in vv.1 – 4! Verse 12 makes this clear.

In v.7, the repetition of the word “Nile” is more clearly seen in the NASB’s more literal translation than in the NIV at this point, and this is helpful as it shows Isaiah’s stress on the impotence of a pagan deity. In fact, in the Hebrew the word “Nile”occurs five times in vv.5 – 10, and there are several other expressions pointing to it less explicitly.English versions that conceal this kind of linguistic phenomenon usually do so to smooth out the style for the English language reader, but in fact they can remove an intended emphasis.

Again, as in vv.1 – 4, we are reminded of the events associated with the exodus, for several of the plagues at that time had involved the judgment of the Nile. The fishing and linen industries (vv.8 – 10) were important, both of them completely dependent on the fauna and flora of the Nile.

11 – 15 Constructive, progressive, and stable rule require the marriage of

power and wisdom.These are the characteristics of God's great king (11:1 – 5) and also the qualities of God himself. In vv.1 – 4 he overcomes the power of Egypt and in v.3 brings Egypt's wisdom to nought. This theme is now further expounded (cf. 1Co 1:20). Every great monarch feels the need for wise counsel, but what if the wisest in the land have nothing but lunacy to offer (v.11)? No matter how ancient or exalted their lore, it makes no difference to their ineptness (cf. Ge 41). The rhetorical question, with its taunt at paganism's ineffectual wisdom, reminds us of the reiterated mocking questions later in Isaiah (e.g., Isa 41:26; 44:7; 45:20 – 21). Zoan and Memphis (19:11, 13) were the two most important cities in Lower Egypt. They are mentioned together because of their administrative importance.

The quaint architectural analogy implicit in v.13b is not peculiar to this verse but is found in a number of OT passages (e.g., Ps 118:22; Zec 10:4).Its use in Isaiah 28:16 is particularly interesting in the light of its use here, for here the leaders who should be giving stability to Egypt lead her astray, while there the God of Israel promises a leader who will give to his people true stability. The unifying and stabilizing effect of good leadership may also be in view in the different analogy used in Ephesians 4:16 (cf. v.11). We note, too, that both here and in Isaiah 28 the folly and confusion of the leaders is due to drunkenness.

When the prophet says, "The LORD has poured into them a spirit of dizziness" (v.14), he is of course thinking of a personal spirit (cf. 1Sa 16:14; 18:10;19:9; 1Ki 22:19 – 23). It comes for moral reasons and as a judgment from God. If we accept that God may use an evil human power in judgment (cf. Isa 10:5), then there is really no difference in principle if he uses an evil spiritual being, as here. Foolish confidence in one's own wisdom may lead not only to failure to produce appropriate counsel but also to walking and causing others to walk along a pathway that leads to disaster. The lack of a wise or even a consistent policy in dealing with Assyria seems to be in view here. For v.15, see the comment at 9:14 – 15.

16 – 17 O. Kaiser and Clements treat vv.16 – 25 as a series of later interpolations, thus effectively destroying one of the most glorious oracles in this book. In the Overview on this chapter, we mentioned the arguments of Mauchline and Erlandsson in favor of an eighth-century date and Isaianic authorship. Clements (in loc.) simply says that these attempts are wrong — without a mention of the arguments themselves or any counterarguments.The

fact that this section is in prose while the earlier section is poetry tells us nothing about authorship, for there are many sections of oracles in prose form among the undisputedly Isaianic parts of this book. Why prose here, when the message is so amazing and wonderful? We may tentatively suggest that it is because of the greater clarity of prose writing over against the suggestiveness and sometimes possible ambiguity of poetry. It is important that such an astonishing revelation should not be misunderstood.

Isaiah employs בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא (“in that day”; v.16) forty-two times — a quarter of the instances of its use in the OT and nearly half of its occurrences in the prophets. It lays special emphasis on the time that is in view and is often used in eschatological contexts as here (it occurs also in vv.18, 19, 23, 24).

Verses 16 – 17 form a bridge between the first part of the oracle, dominated by judgment, and the remainder of it, centering in grace and salvation.They emphasize the fear induced in the Egyptians by God’s acts of judgment (cf. v.1). We can well see the reason for this, because this fear was a prelude to their repentance. The account in Exodus frequently refers to the hand of the Lord and its activities against Egypt (e.g., Ex 8:19; 9:15; 13:3, 9, 16; cf. Dt 4:34). Because God was on Israel’s side, her very name became a terror to the Egyptians (cf.Ex 12:33; 15:16; Ps 105:38); so also the mention of Judah will terrorize the Egyptians (Isa 19:17). It has been well said that one man with God is a majority, and so one man may be a cause for fear to those who withstand the purposes of God.

18 Much of the debate about this chapter has centered on this verse and the next two. Assuming the accuracy of the majority of the Hebrew manuscripts, which support the NIV’s “The City of Destruction,” we will discuss other possible readings in the Notes. The verse as it stands is patient of two different interpretations. (1) It could mean Jews living in Egypt, occupying five of its cities, and so instituting a colony of Yahweh worshipers in this pagan land. Jeremiah 44:1, 15 mentions four places in Egypt to which Jews had gone to find refuge from the strife in their own land in the sixth century BC.It is, of course, possible to take the verse as a prediction of this situation.Watts (in loc.), who holds this view, says, “This is the most positive interpretation of the outward flow of population from Israel in the OT (comparable only to the NT’s commissions in Matt 28:19 – 20 and Acts 1:8).”

(2) Particularly in this context, v.18 could refer to the conversion of Egypt to the worship of the true God. Erlandsson, 78, following Kissane, understands it in this way and sees in the five cities an allusion to the original conquest of Canaan by Israel.After the capture of Jericho and Ai by Joshua's forces, their first great victory was over the kings of five important Canaanite cities, namely Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon (Jos 10); this victory led to the conquest of the whole country.So, Kissane and Erlandsson maintain, the spiritual conquest of Egypt outlined in vv.19 – 22 starts with the conversion of five cities promised in v.18. This interpretation not only fits the context perfectly but also furnishes a further example of allusion to the exodus-conquest period that is such a feature of this oracle.

What, then, is "the City of Destruction"? The Hebrew *haheres* seems like a play on haheres("the city of the sun"), which is the Hebrew equivalent of Heliopolis, the City of the Sun. The latter is actually read in some of the ancient sources of the text (see Notes). If so, then, the conversion of the people of this stronghold of sun worship is perhaps treated as a major victory, decisive and significant enough to form a parallel with a great act of destruction, perhaps that of Jericho, at the time of the conquest, but this time with its paganism destroyed and its people converted.

19 – 22 These verses are of great interest because they spell out in detail the circumstances and results of the conversion of the Egyptians. The "altar"(v.19) has sometimes been identified with the Jewish temple built at Elephantine (modern Aswan) in the sixth or fifth century (see the "Excursus on Jewish Colonies and Temples in Egypt" in Watts).There is evidence from Josephus (*J.W.* 7.432 [10.3]) that Onias III, when founding the Jewish temple at Leontopolis, appealed to this verse as biblical warrant for the erection of such a temple in Egypt. Motyer is surely correct, however, when he says (1993, in loc.) that it is clearly Egypt here that turns to worship the Lord. Although one or more historical fulfillments of such a prediction could be plausibly suggested, it is evident that the final fulfillment of vv.16 – 25 has not yet come, unless it is all to be viewed as fulfilled spiritually in the triumphs of the gospel in Egypt (see the Introduction, pp. 450 – 52, and the quotation from Athanasius in the Overview to this section).

There is another echo of the conquest of Canaan in the reference to the monument or pillar. Pillars were associated with pagan worship in Canaan and

so were prohibited to the Israelites (cf. Dt 7:5;12:3), but it is clear from v.20 that something different is in view here. Just as the altars constructed by the patriarchs were witnesses for the true God and his self-disclosure at these places, so various stones and pillars of witness were erected in the days of Joshua (see Jos 4:3, 20 – 22; 7:26; 8:29; 10:27; cf. also the altar of witness of 22:34 and the great stone of witness in 24:26 – 27). The pillar monument here, situated on the border of Egypt, probably symbolizes the claiming of the land for the true and living God, the Lord Almighty.

The conquest analogy continues (v.20b) with a promise that could have come straight out of the book of Judges (cf., e.g., Jdg 3:9, 15). The promise, couched in the language of Judges, appears to be an assurance of deliverance from physical oppressors; but the savior and defender is singular, while the oppressors are plural. Perhaps too much cannot be based on this grammatical feature, but the language is well fitted to refer to the supreme Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Other possible exodus-conquest allusions may escape the reader, but it would be difficult to miss v.21a. One of the major themes of the exodus story is the knowledge of the Lord that is given in its events, but with an important distinction between the form that knowledge took for the Israelites and for the Egyptians. The former knew the Lord in the context of his grace (e.g., Ex 6:7), the latter as a God of judgment (e.g., Ex 7:5). In fact, the latter is much more frequently declared than the former.The Lord will reveal himself to Egypt again, but this time in an entirely different way, much more after the pattern of his self-disclosure to Israel: on the basis of grace.

The sacrifices, grain offerings, and vows (v.21b) suggest a comparison with the Mosaic law, perhaps to show this is neither an inferior revelation nor a relationship with God of a different kind from that given to Israel. Rather, the Egyptians are to be on equal footing with their erstwhile slaves, who had been so gloriously redeemed from their midst.There is an implied rebuke to Israel in the assertion that “they will make vows to the LORD and keep them,” which suggests that the basis of their relationship with him is the new covenant (cf. Jer 31:31 – 34), fulfilled in the death of Christ, the ultimate sacrifice (cf. esp. Heb 8:7 – 9:15).

Verse 22 is a virtual summary of most of the oracle. Isaiah may be indebted to

his older contemporary Hosea for this verse's thought and language (cf. Hos 6:1), but he applies them to Egypt rather than Israel. The reference to a plague, however, is another clear echo of the exodus. The pleas of the Egyptians for the lifting of the plagues had been heard through the intercession of Moses, though the hearts of Pharaoh and his servants lacked true penitence. In terms of this prophecy, however, the plague will bring them to repentance, and God will hear their own cries for deliverance.

23 A first-time reader of this oracle, aware of the general background and content of the OT, becomes increasingly astonished in reading this chapter, at least from v.18 on. The astonishment reaches a new height at v.23, for the revelation of God's amazing grace to the Gentiles embraces not only the old enemy, Egypt, but also the new one, Assyria. Isaiah apparently does not reject this revelation, as Jonah did at first (Jnh 4:1 – 3). What spiritual responsiveness such a revelation would require in its recipient!

In Isaiah's day, Assyria was the one power feared by every little nation in the area. The calculated brutality of the Assyrians probably made them more generally hated and feared than any other nation of antiquity. The Egyptians, Babylonians, and Persians were all capable of inhumane acts, but the Assyrian record for callous cruelty is difficult to parallel. This amazing verse assures Isaiah's hearers that Egypt and Assyria will drop their longstanding antagonism and cooperate not only in a great road-building project furthering international communication, commerce, and peace but — abandoning presumably their own distinctive brands of paganism — will also come together to worship the true God, the God of the little Israelite nation they have both afflicted so sorely! As Motyer (1999, in loc.) says, commenting on the theme of harmony in worship,"First it was five cities (18), then the whole land (19 – 22), and now the whole world."

24 – 25 It may seem that this oracle can reach no greater height, but these two verses go further still.Israel, for a time out of the picture, now takes her place as one member of a trio of godly states. Some of her own titles (cf., e.g., 1:3; 45:11) are applied to her former enemies.This is no temporary situation soon to give way to a return of old antagonisms and reconversion to paganism, but instead the Lord has established a covenantal relationship with these nations, perhaps extending to them the new covenant he promised in Jeremiah to make with his people of Israel and Judah (cf. Jer 31:31 – 34). (See the Introduction, pp. 451 –

52, for a general discussion of the way such prophecies should be inter-preted.) Watts (in loc.) says:

> Can one imagine? Modern Egypt, Israel, and SyriaIraq becoming a triad of blessing and peace today? Open borders, flowing commerce, mutual worship? . .. The dream has too many hindrances for it to become reality for our day. It seems that this was also true in 716 BC [the date he assigns to this prophecy] as chaps. 20 – 22 testify. But God's dreams! Worth thinking about!

NOTES

1 מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see Note on 13:1.

The Baal of Ugarit was often called "the Rider of the Clouds," and this appears to form the background to the cloud language here and elsewhere in the OT where it is connected with Yahweh's military activity. So Yahweh, rather than Baal, is the true warrior God. See the discussion in T. Longman III and D. G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 67 – 68.

6 הָאֱזִנִיהוּ (*heʾezniḥû*) is a *hapax legomenon* in this form, and 1QIsa reads וְהַזְנִיחוּ (*wᵉhizniḥû*), assumed by the NIV's "will stink," though the MT too can hardly mean anything else.

9 The 1QIsa reading makes the combers or carders women and the weavers men.

10 The NIV's "the workers in cloth" and the NASB's "the pillars" ("*of Egypt*" being understood) assume two different but possible derivations of the same Hebrew word. The former fits the context better.

11 Zoan on the northeastern Nile Delta, known to the Greeks as Tanis, was made Egypt's capital by Ramesses II. If the late date for the exodus is correct, this means that in the same city where Moses confronted Pharaoh, Egyptian wisdom was confounded (cf. Ps 78:12).

13 נֹף (nōp)is rendered “Memphis” in the English versions, as this is how it was known to the Greeks.It was the ancient capital of Egypt, situated near modern Cairo.

18 O. Kaiser (in loc.) gives an excellent brief summary of the problems facing the commentator on this verse. As mentioned above, most Hebrew manuscripts read עִיר הַהֶרֶס (*ʿîr haheres*, “the City of Destruc-tion”); but 1QIsa, the Targum, and some Hebrew manuscripts read עִיר הַחֶרֶס (*ʿîr haḥeres*,' “the City of the Sun”), which must be Heliopolis. Most LXX manuscripts imply a Hebrew reading עִיר הַצֶּדֶק (*ʿîr haṣṣedeq*,“the City of Righteousness”). The variety of readings build to a fascinating textual problem, especially as each of them would make good sense.

A good case can be made for a reference to the City of the Sun, for this would show what a signal triumph the Lord was to win over Egyptian paganism. The reading “City of Destruction” could have arisen as a punning taunt. There is a good deal of evidence for this kind of phenomenon in the OT.The pun could, of course, have been in the mind of the prophet, not of a scribe, so that even if we posit something of this sort, it does not necessarily settle the textual issue. In some ways the third reading is the most interesting of all. It suggests an allusion to 1:26 (cf. Note at 1:21). In the context it may suggest a parallel between this city and Jerusalem, the first and greatest of the five cities of Joshua 10 (see comment on v.18, above). This would fit excellently into such an allusive context but has less support in other ways. The issue cannot be settled with any certainty. Motyer’s comment (1993, in loc.) is apt:“Yet amid all this obscurity the oracle fills a clear role in the sequence. With small beginnings even Egypt will begin to participate in the unity of God’s world-wide people and to make its commitment to the Lord.”

H. Prophecy against Egypt and Cush (20:1 – 6)

OVERVIEW

This passage is unique in chs. 13 – 23, for it gives not only an oracle but also the circumstances of its delivery (see, however, the comment at 14:28).This is perfectly understandable, for — unlike all the other oracles in this section of the book — it is associated with an acted prophecy and so demands a narrative setting. Its position is appropriate, for it follows chs. 18 – 19, which focus on the two nations against whom this oracle is given.

> [1]In the year that the supreme commander, sent by Sargon king of Assyria, came to Ashdod and attacked and captured it — [2] at that time the LORD spoke through Isaiah son of Amoz. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot.
>
> [3] Then the LORD said, "Just as my servant Isaiah has gone stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, [4] so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared — to Egypt's shame. [5] Those who trusted in Cush and boasted in Egypt will be afraid and put to shame. [6]In that day the people who live on this coast will say, 'See what has happened to those we relied on, those we fled to for help and deliverance from the king of Assyria! How then can we escape?' "

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Five Philistine cities formed a federation dominated first by one and then by another. The rebellion against Assyria at this time centers in Ashdod and belongs to the period 713 – 711 BC (see Introduction, p. 436), probably developing in response to events farther south. The Ethiopian dynasty had gained control of Egypt in 715 BC, and the petty states of Palestine seem to have felt there might be more hope of securing its assistance against Assyria. The demise of Ashdod is mentioned in the Assyrian inscriptions and can be accurately dated to 711 BC.

There has been some discussion of the time references in vv.1 – 2, especially in the light of v.3. Did Isaiah's acted prophecy begin in 711, as a straightforward reading of the passage suggests?If so, Ashdod's fall, Isaiah's actions, and the prophetic word that explain them constitute together a warning to Judah not to rely on Egypt. This understanding of the passage presents no major difficulties. Most commentators, however, assume v.2 is a parenthesis or that its time reference is not meant to be specific, but simply an indication of a general period.

The way Isaiah is clothed (v.2) suggests to some commentators that he is in mourning at this time, either through personal bereavement or his deep concern about the nation. At least from Elijah's time, however, such rough clothing seems to have been associated with the office of prophet (2Ki 1:8;Zec 13:4; Mk 1:6).The wording does not preclude the possibility that he is wearing a loincloth (cf.v.4), for strict nakedness was religiously and socially unacceptable in Israel (cf. Ge 9:20 – 27). Oswalt (in loc.) remarks, "In that society where the part was identified with the whole, partial nudity would have conveyed its point very effectively."

3 – 6 God calls Isaiah "my servant," a title of honor destined to be considerably developed later on in the book and especially in the so-called Servant Songs (see the Introduction, pp. 453 – 62). First comes the sign, then its significance is clarified in a spoken prophecy.Acted prophecy occurs frequently in the OT (e.g., 1Ki 11:29 – 32; Jer 13:1 – 11; Eze 4), although this is the only example of it in Isaiah.It can be viewed as an example of the fact that the OT always treats the human personality as a unity. The God of the OT, too, reveals himself by both deed and word in perfect harmony.We should notice, though, that the act normally requires verbal interpretation to become a true prophecy with specific meaning. The sign is a message to those in Judah inclined to trust in Egypt (cf. 30:1 – 5;31:1 – 3), especially in its revived strength under its new Ethiopian rulers. In fact, the Egyptian army sent to help Judah in 701 was defeated at Eltekeh,the first of a series of disastrous defeats at the hands of Assyria in the next few decades.

Verses 5 – 6 probably refer to different people, those in v.5 being chiefly Judah's leaders, while v.6 refers to the inhabitants of the Palestinian coastal strip. So not only Ashdod but also the whole Philistine federation will suffer. It may even imply that Phoenicia, farther north, will be smitten by the Assyrians.

NOTES

1 תַּרְתָּן (*tartān*) is “supreme commander” in the NIV. It really means “second” and shows the great value the Assyrians attached to military prowess. Their supreme commander was second in status only to the king himself.

2 The NIV (“sandals”) and other English versions follow the LXX in reading “shoes” rather than “shoe” with the MT, and the former reading has the support of 1QIsa.

I. Prophecy against Babylon (21:1 – 10)

OVERVIEW

The oracles of chs. 21 and 22 are strongly atmospheric, at times almost eerie, with darkness and a feeling of unease or even horror much in evidence. This passage bristles with difficulties; yet, as is so often the case in such circumstances, its main thrust is clear: God will destroy pagan Babylon (v.9). There are two main schools of interpretation. For some the occasion depicted in the prophet's vision is Babylon's downfall in 539 BC, when Cyrus the Persian entered the city with his triumphant forces. He was originally king of Persian lands that were formerly part of Elam, and he had conquered Media a decade or so before his assault on Babylonia. Thus, "Elam" and "Media" in v.2 refer to this multinational army. Some taking this view attribute the prophecy to Isaiah, while others attribute it to a writer contemporary with the events it describes, usually because they reject supernatural predictive prophecy.

The other main interpretation relates it to the time of Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon.Mentioned in Isaiah 39, this king was known as Marduk-apal-iddina in Babylon. He was prince of Bit Yakin in southern Babylonia, revolted against Assyria, and had himself crowned king of Babylon in 722 BC with the support of the Elamites. He reigned during several periods, and after his death Babylon had further times of independence from Assyria before Sennacherib's ferocious destruction of it in 689. There had, however, been earlier sack-ings of the city under Sargon II and Sennacherib while Merodach-Baladan was alive. This would put not only the prophecy but also its fulfillment in Isaiah's day.

A. A. Macintosh takes a mediating view in *Isaiah 21*. He contends that this passage is a sort of palimpsest, a manuscript from which the writing has been removed so that it may be reused. In Macintosh's view, this passage, originally a prophecy connected with Merodach-Baladan, has been worked over to relate it to the later and, for the Jews, much more important fall of Babylon to Cyrus.

Macintosh's theory, however, raises as many problems as it solves and

tampers unnecessarily with a chapter that has come down to us in its integrity. Erlandsson, 81 – 92, argues persuasively for a date around 700 BC, and he relates the passage to Merodach-Baladan's reign in Babylon. The exposition that follows accepts, in general, the main lines of his interpretation.

1 An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea:
Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland,
an invader comes from the desert,
from a land of terror.

2 A dire vision has been shown to me:
The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot.
Elam, attack! Media, lay siege!
I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused.

3 At this my body is racked with pain,
pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor;
I am staggered by what I hear,
I am bewildered by what I see.

4 My heart falters,
fear makes me tremble;
the twilight I longed for
has become a horror to me.

5 They set the tables,
they spread the rugs,
they eat, they drink!
Get up, you officers,
oil the shields!

6 This is what the Lord says to me:
"Go, post a lookout
and have him report what he sees.

7 When he sees chariots
with teams of horses,
riders on donkeys
or riders on camels,
let him be alert,
fully alert."

8 And the lookout shouted,
"Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower;
every night I stay at my post.

9 Look, here comes a man in a chariot
with a team of horses.
And he gives back the answer:
'Babylon has fallen, has fallen!
All the images of its gods
lie shattered on the ground!' "

10 O my people, crushed on the threshing floor,

I tell you what I have heard
from the LORD Almighty,
from the God of Israel.

COMMENTARY

1a What is “the Desert by the Sea”? It could refer to the desert lands southeast of Babylon, where Merodach-Baladan’s home territory lay. Delitzsch (in loc.) maintained it was the great plain Babylon stood on, which was so divided by lakes and marshy country that it was appropriate to call it “the sea,” as indeed one Greek writer did. The medieval Jewish commentator Ibn Ezra points out that יָם(“sea”)can also mean “west,” and that it is so-called here because it lay to the west of those mentioned in v.2 as besieging it. He argued it is called a desert because this was what the Lord was planning to make it through his judgment. All three views assert, of course, that “Desert by the Sea” is either Babylon the city, or Babylonia the country. The Septuagint omits “by the Sea.”

1b – 2 In his vision Isaiah sees an invader approaching Babylon from the desert through which the invading armies will pass on their way to it, and he sees them as like the whirlwinds that are liable to move toward Judah through the Negeb (see Notes). He then tells his hearers he has been shown a dire vision.The NASB and RSV bring out the way noun and verb echo each other in both halves of the poetic parallelism: “The plunderer plunders, and the destroyer destroys.”

Why is the vision described as “dire”? If the oracle refers to Cyrus’s attack on Babylon, it may have seemed dreadful at first, because the Jews in the city could well have perished in its overthrow. In fact, however, this did not happen, and an application to the time of Merodach-Baladan is certainly feasible.News of his revolt against Assyria would encourage the Jews to think Assyria might be weakened or even eventually be overthrown. Babylon’s fall would be a severe setback to such hopes.

Almost all commentators take v.2b as the Lord’s calling Elam and Media to attack Babylonia. The difficulty, however, is that in Isaiah’s day it was much more natural to see Elam and Media as enemies of Assyria and allies of Babylonia. Erlandsson, following Ibn Ezra, gives an interesting solution to the problem by suggesting that v.2 has the battle cries of Babylonia’s allies as they

launch their attack against Assyria. He then says, “The enigmatic ‘I will put an end to all sighs’ is perhaps an echo of Marduk-apal-iddina’s promise to his partner-in-confederation Hezekiah.” This assumes a different translation from that given in the NIV (see Notes).

3 – 4 The oracle against Moab (15:5; 16:9, 11) showed the deep distress Isaiah felt at human slaughter, even when it concerned a nation so often an enemy of his own people. Clements (in loc.) thinks this is what these two verses mean.Possibly, however, Isaiah’s horror comes from his own identification with his people so that he feels their deep dismay over the downfall of their hope in Merodach-Baladan. The latter is perhaps the more likely, since he mentions fear as well as horror. Mauchline (in loc.) says, “The final part of verse 4 can mean that the twilight hour of his days, in which he used to enjoy a period of quiet thought .. . is now filled with foreboding and fear; or the reference may be to the evening of his life, when the prophet had hoped for peace and quiet and now saw that hope shattered.”

5 Here is a scene of feasting, reminiscent of Daniel 5, but where is it enacted? Most commentators assume it takes place in Babylon. Herodotus reported that the taking of Babylon by the Persians in 539 BC was so swift that many at their wine in the city center did not even know the outlying parts of the city were in enemy hands. Erlandsson understands it differently. The scene is Jerusalem, and it is the leaders of Judah who are feasting (cf.22:1 – 2, 13). In this case v.5b does not depict a sudden change of mood, with agitated preparation for battle, but underlines the atmosphere of leisured ease. Arrangements are made for sentry duty, the officers detailed for it using their time on guard to apply oil to the shields to prevent them from cracking under blows from enemy weapons, or, some have thought, for a holy war.

6 – 10 Isaiah has seen a vision; then he hears the word of the Lord. The prophet is to have a man posted on the lookout (v.6). Any group of riders must be reported (v.7), for they may be bringing news of what has happened in the far country.The lookout is at his post for many days (v.8). His tour of duty wearies him, but his patience is at last rewarded as a lone charioteer appears on the horizon (v.9). What is his message? That Babylon, from which the people have been expecting so much, has fallen, presumably to the Assyrians (v.10).

There was no trace of the rejoicing that accompanied the fall of Babylon in ch. 14. If Erlandsson is correct in his interpretation, this is simple to explain, for the prophet is describing the downfall of Babylon, not before the Persians — who were to be the means of return from exile for the Jews — but before the Assyrians, still the main "scourge of God"in the Fertile Crescent. Watts (in loc.) asks why Jerusalem should have been so concerned about an event so far away, and he answers, "Babylon had stood for more than a decade as living proof that the Assyrians could be overcome. It was evidence that rebellion could succeed." But now there is a severe blow to their hopes for a successful revolt.The reference to the images of Babylon's gods (cf.46:1 – 6) and their shattering is perhaps an implied rebuke to Judah's leaders. How can they hope for God's blessing on an alliance with pagans?

NOTES

1 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see the Note at 13:1.
נגב (*negeb*, "Negeb"), translated "southland" in the NIV, is the tract of land lying south of Judah. It was barren, semidesert country. Oswalt (in loc.) remarks that "the reference to the Negeb . . . seems to argue against this statement having been made in 540, to people who had been living in Babylon nearly all their lives." There would have been other analogies available with greater force closer to their Babylonian homes. The NIV's "invader" is not represented in the text.

2 The NIV correctly renders the participle בּוֹגֵד (*bôgēd*) as "traitor" (cf. NASB, "treacherous one") rather than "plunderer" (so RSV), thus following the correct sense of the verb בָּגַד (*bāgad*, "to betray"; cf. 24:16; 33:1; 48:8). Macintosh, 12, doubts whether the other sense is valid: "Such a meaning cannot be said to be clearly attested for the verb, and it is not indicated in this verse either by the ancient versions or by the rabbinic commentators."

כָּל־אַנְחָתָהּ הִשְׁבַּתִּי (*kol-ʾanḥātâ hišbattî*) is translated, "I will bring to an end all the groaning she has caused.""She has groaned" is not represented in the text and need not be assumed as required to give good sense, if Erlandsson is correct. See comment above.

J. Prophecy against Edom (21:11 – 12)

11 An oracle concerning Dumah :
Someone calls to me from Seir,
“Watchman, what is left of the night?
Watchman, what is left of the night?”
12 The watchman replies,
“Morning is coming, but also the night.
If you would ask, then ask;
and come back yet again.”

COMMENTARY

11 – 12 Our commentary on this short oracle has already commenced, for the heading we have given is itself an interpretation. The NIV margin says, “*Dumah* means *silence* or stillness, a word play on *Edom*” (emphasis theirs). This is almost certainly correct, though some commentators (e.g., Oswalt, in loc.) favor a reference rather to an Arabian oasis — Dumah el Jandal. The latter seems unlikely, however, in view of the name “Seir,” the rocky, mountainous area in Edom’s heartland so often used as a synonym for it (cf., e.g., Nu 24:18; Jdg 5:4).

T. K. Cheyne (*The Book of Isaiah Chronologically Arranged* [London: Macmillan, 1870], 128), says that for all its practical significance for the prophet’s contemporaries and for later generations, this short oracle might just as well not have been written. Yet, as part of the Word of God, it must have both meaning and relevance. Its meaning is perhaps secured if we understand it through the wordplay in its title. God gives light to his people in the midst of perplexing historical circumstances. The very ministry of Isaiah is evidence of this.

It is otherwise, however, with Judah’s pagan neighbors. The reply of the watchman (v.12) is so vague and enigmatic — perhaps even evasive — that it is tantamount to no reply at all. The only certainty is that night will end in morning but then will come another night. Perhaps this refers to the lifting of the oppressive Assyrian overlordship, which will be replaced by another black night, the rule of Babylon. Oswalt and Widyapranawa (in loc.) are among commentators suggesting other possible interpretations, which do not, in fact,

affect the main purport of the message.

NOTE

11 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, “oracle”), see Note at 13:1.

K. Prophecy against Arabia (21:13 – 17)

13 An oracle concerning Arabia:
You caravans of Dedanites,
who camp in the thickets of Arabia,
14 bring water for the thirsty;
you who live in Tema,
bring food for the fugitives.
15 They flee from the sword,
from the drawn sword,
from the bent bow
and from the heat of battle.
16 This is what the Lord says to me: "Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. 17 The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few." The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken.

COMMENTARY

13 – 17 This oracle, or pair of oracles (for some consider vv.16 – 17 to be separate, though linked), has often been thought to have close ties with its brief predecessor. This would be true if the identification of Dumah with an Arabian oasis is correct. See, however, the comment above. Edom was really on the edge of Arabia. Dumah, Tema, and Kedar all occur in Genesis 25:13 – 16, in the list of Ishmael's descendants. The Dumah referred to there, of course, is the Arabian one, as Edom was the people of Esau, not Ishmael (Ge 25:30).

Macintosh, 139 – 43, suggests vv.11 – 17 really form one unit and that vv.13 – 17 concern the flight of Edomite refugees to the Arabian oases to find refuge from the enemy from Mesopotamia. This would then provide a parallel with the plight of the Moabites who sought refuge in Judah and in Edom (see comments on ch. 16).This theory requires some textual emendation, and we should always seek first to make good sense of a text as it stands.

Sargon II conducted a campaign against the northern Arabian tribes in 715 BC, which could well provide an appropriate setting for this oracle. There were armed men (vv.15, 17) drawn from the various Arabian tribes, but they were no match for the Assyrians and were put to flight. They fled exhausted, parched

with thirst and in need of food. The caravans plying their trade and camping out in the wastelands (v.13) and the settled town-dwellers of the oases (v.14) are both urged to provide sustenance for the fugitives. The resistance of the Arabian tribes will be short-lived, their armies reduced to a very meagre remnant within twelve months (v.16).

The closing oracle formula (v.17) probably underlines the fact that this is the judgment of the God of Israel, whose sphere of operations embraces the whole world and is not simply the interaction of human forces.

NOTES

13 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see Note at 13:1. In Ezekiel 25:13, Dedan has a close association with Edom, and so it seems to have been located in northwestern Arabia.

בְּיַעַר (*bayyaʿar*) is translated "thickets" in the NIV, following the ancient versions (cf. 22:8, "Forest"). Delitzsch (in loc.), pointing out the unsuitability of this in the present context, suggests a link with a cognate Arabic root meaning "rocky terrain," which certainly seems more apt.

The ancient versions presuppose a different pointing of *bāʿereb*, "concerning Arabia"), reading *bāʿereb*("in the evening"), and some modern commentators prefer this. Delitzsch (in loc.) makes the interesting suggestion that, like Dumah (v.11), the word has a double entendre. This seems likely. Like Edom, Arabia was destined for a long, dark night.

14 Tema (modern Teyman) was in northwestern Arabia on one of the best-watered oases in the peninsula.

16 For the binding of a servant by contract, see the comment at 16:14. Kedar was an important Arabian tribe, but the word appears as a general reference to the Arabian bedouin in three passages (42:11; 60:7; Jer 2:10). In this context the wider reference seems appropriate, though the narrower is not impossible.

L. Prophecy against Jerusalem (22:1 – 25)

OVERVIEW

This chapter divides into two well-defined sec-tions: vv.1 – 14 and 15 – 25. Their subjects are different, yet linked. The first section shows us Isaiah's strong denunciation of Jerusalem's people because of their attitude when their city is under threat.The second focuses attention on two of its leaders.

What is the occasion of the first section? Some (e.g., B. S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* [London: SCM, 1967]) maintain that it is impossible to be sure, and certain identification is not easy. If we read it in the light of chs. 36 – 37, we may conclude that it is the deliverance of the city from Sennacherib — the majority view among scholars. Chapters 36 – 37 emphasize the divine deliverance that took place in response to the faith of Hezekiah and his people, while this oracle shows how shallow this faith really is. The two passages are not necessarily in conflict any more than the approach of Kings and Chronicles to Josiah's reformation — in which the writers rejoiced — conflicts with Jeremiah's recognition of the superficiality and shallowness of the spirit of penitence in which it was undertaken.

Oswalt (in loc.), following Ginsberg, thinks the threat to the city is at the time of Sargon's siege of Ashdod in 711 BC. Motyer (1993, in loc.) argues for a time of celebration at the inauguration of Hezekiah's tunnel. Writers such as Young and Clements (in loc.) argue that the siege here is that of Nebuchadnezzar, though Young holds the passage to be both Isaianic and predictive, while Clements denies both (see the valuable discussion in Young). I acknowledge that each identification can be well argued, but I consider that the literary contiguity of vv.1 – 14 and 15 – 25 provides strong evidence for Sennacherib's siege because of the way the men referred to in the later part of the chapter feature in chs. 36 – 37.

Incidentally, both Clements and O. Kaiser (in loc.) divide the passage between several writers, while other commentators treat it as a unity. Motyer's comment

(1993, in loc.) is apt: “We need to remember that this sort of reconstruction is not based on manuscriptal or other objective evidence but is an interpretative exercise as commentators wrestle with what they perceive to be the inherent problems of the text.”

1 An oracle concerning the Valley of Vision:
What troubles you now,
that you have all gone up on the roofs,
2 O town full of commotion, O city of tumult and revelry?
Your slain were not killed by the sword,
nor did they die in battle.
3 All your leaders have fled together;
they have been captured without using the bow.
All you who were caught were taken prisoner together,
having fled while the enemy was still far away.
4 Therefore I said, “Turn away from me;
let me weep bitterly.
Do not try to console me
over the destruction of my people.”
5 The Lord, the LORD Almighty, has a day
of tumult and trampling and terror
in the Valley of Vision,
a day of battering down walls
and of crying out to the mountains.
6 Elam takes up the quiver,
with her charioteers and horses;
Kir uncovers the shield.
7 Your choicest valleys are full of chariots,
and horsemen are posted at the city gates;
8 the defenses of Judah are stripped away.
And you looked in that day
to the weapons in the Palace of the Forest;
9 you saw that the City of David
had many breaches in its defenses;
you stored up water
in the Lower Pool.
10 You counted the buildings in Jerusalem
and tore down houses to strengthen the wall.
11 You built a reservoir between the two walls
for the water of the Old Pool,
but you did not look to the One who made it,
or have regard for the One who planned it long ago.
12 The Lord, the LORD Almighty,
called you on that day
to weep and to wall,

to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth.
13 But see, there is joy and revelry,
slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep,
eating of meat and drinking of wine!
"Let us eat and drink," you say,
"for tomorrow we die!"
14 The LORD Almighty has revealed this in my hearing: "Till your dying day this sin will not be atoned for," says the Lord, the LORD Almighty.
15 This is what the Lord, the LORD Almighty, says:
"Go, say to this steward,
to Shebna, who is in charge of the palace:
16 What are you doing here and who gave you permission
to cut out a grave for yourself here,
hewing your grave on the height
and chiseling your resting place in the rock?
17 "Beware, the LORD is about to take firm hold of you
and hurl you away, O you mighty man.
18 He will roll you up tightly like a ball
and throw you into a large country.
There you will die
and there your splendid chariots will remain —
you disgrace to your master's house!
19 I will depose you from your office,
and you will be ousted from your position.
20 "In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah. 21 I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him. He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. 23 I will drive him like a peg into a fi rm place; he will be a seat of honor for the house of his father. 24 All the glory of his family will hang on him: its offspring and offshoots — all its lesser vessels, from the bowls to all the jars.
25 "In that day," declares the LORD Almighty, "the peg driven into the firm place will give way; it will be sheared off and will fall, and the load hanging on it will be cut down." The LORD has spoken.

COMMENTARY

1aThe expression *gê' ḥizzāyôn* ("Valley of Vision") has been variously understood, though always in reference to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was, of course, built on Mounts Zion and Moriah, but in fact it was comparatively low, being surrounded by hills (cf. Ps 125:2; Jer 21:13). "Valley of Vision" may refer to the fact that it was the place where so many prophetic visions — both Isaiah's and those of

other prophets — had been received and given to the people.This would, therefore, intensify the responsibility of her people for their reprehensible attitude. Oswalt (in loc.) takes “vision” to be sarcasm on the prophet’s part.

Many note the exceptional sharpness of the prophet’s language here. He is deeply disturbed. If we are correct in locating the prophecy during the deliverance from Sennacherib, this is late in Isaiah’s public ministry; and he pours into this prophecy all of his disappointment with his own people that has accumulated over many years of ministry to them. He had been warned there would be little response (cf. 6:9 – 10), and this was certainly true in the days of Ahaz (cf. ch. 7). Perhaps he hoped for better things under Hezekiah, a more godly man than his father. This disappointment enabled him to enter into the feelings of the Servant of the Lord as the latter looked back on his own ministry (cf. 49:4).

1b – 2a A noisy spirit of excitement has come on the whole city, with the flat roofs thronging with revelers.The people probably went up originally to survey the Assyrians outside the city but, finding them dead (cf. 37:36), have stayed on to celebrate (cf. vv.12 – 13).

2b – 3 These verses present a contrast to vv.1b – 2a. Sennacherib, in his inscriptions, tells of defeating Hezekiah. This probably took place during the earlier stages of the Assyrian campaign in Judah (cf. 2Ki 18:13 – 16; Isa 1:5 – 9). Clements (in loc.) considers the reference to the slain (v.2b) an ironic comment on the revelers “lying in drunken stupor where, only a short time before, it was feared that they would be killed in battle.” This is possible, though the prophet may be thinking of men captured and put to death early in the Assyrian campaign. The main point Isaiah is making is not affected, for he stresses that the people ought not to glory in themselves, as though they have won a mighty victory. In fact, they were so demoralized at the approach of the enemy that they simply took to their heels and fled.

4 – 8a Isaiah knows that Jerusalem, delivered by a wonderful act of God’s grace, will one day perish at his hand. The people have learned nothing from what has happened. Skinner (in loc.) says:

> He had expected after the great deliverance, and the fulfillment of his own daring predictions, to see

> the emergence of the new Israel, the remnant that was to be the nucleus of the Messianic kingdom. Bitter must have been his disenchantment when he saw that the crisis had come and gone, and left the temper of the nation as frivolous, as secular, and as insensible to the divine as it had been before.

The spiritual sorrow of the prophet for his people is so deep that he is inconsolable (v.4). As a man of God, of course, he can accept what, as a Judean, he cannot welcome; for the destruction of the people revealed to him is the judgment of God.

The day of the Lord, prophesied in 2:6 – 22, will fall on Jerusalem. The NIV brings out the terrifying alliteration and assonance of three consecutive Hebrew words with its translation “tumult and trampling and terror” (v.5). The people have been looking down over the walls, gloating over the slain Assyrians. On God’s great day those same walls will be battered down by the enemy, and the mountains surrounding the Valley of Vision will echo to the ineffectual wails of Jerusalem’s inhabitants.

This prophecy, whenever it was delivered, was fulfilled when Nebuchadnezzar took the city in 586 BC, though history was destined to repeat itself in AD 70 — when the Romans overcame Jewish resistance and entered Jerusalem to wreak havoc on its people and buildings. There may have been Elamites and Syrians (from Kir) serving in the army of the Babylonian king (v.6). Their mention imparts an extra dimension of terror to the oracle, for it pictures the besieging army as an international one. Sweeney (in loc.), however, makes out a case for the inclusion of Elamites and troops from Kir in Sennacherib’s army as well as recognizing the strength of the argument for a reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s army.

8b – 11 Isaiah returns to the situation in Jerusalem when the Assyrian army first appeared on the horizon. Their actions told Isaiah that the people’s trust was in human beings rather than in God. A city facing a long siege had many needs. Its defenders needed adequate weapons. In the Palace of the Forest (v.8), Jerusalem had its own royal armory (cf. 1Ki 7:2 – 5); and no doubt its staff undertook an urgent check on their supply of swords and spears that day.

The city walls and especially its defensive towers were in need of repair (v.9), and some of its houses had to be destroyed to obtain stones for this (v.10), for there was neither time nor liberty of access to get stones from the Judean

quarries. Any house not really needed had to go. Ahaz, in unbelief, busied himself with the water supply (cf. 7:1 – 3), and the men of Hezekiah's Jerusalem had the same outlook (cf. 2Ch 32:1 – 5). A special reservoir was built (v.11), probably to retain surplus water from the Pool of Siloam for future use.

God is the Maker of history as well as of nature. History, with its series of world empires and successive judgments (cf. 40:23 – 24), is under his almighty hand; and he is the God of Israel, for this people was in special relationship with him. Because of this, they should have looked to him with faith. Instead, they were busy trying to find ways of evading the challenge to believe.

12 – 14 In commenting on 17:10, we noted Isaiah's inspired sense of appropriateness in his choice of titles for God. So there is something ominous about the use in v.12 of a title of power —"the LORD Almighty"— instead of one of relationship, such as "the God of Israel." It is repeated twice in v.14. If the people do not seek his grace in repentance, they will feel his power (cf. 1Co 4:21) in a terrifying act of his judgment on their city.

Miscall, 61, describes vv.12 – 13, with their harsh contrast, as the epitome of Isaiah's notion of rebellion and sin (cf. 1:2 – 3; 5:11 – 23). The prophet's sense of fitness was outraged by what he saw as he walked through Jerusalem's streets (v.13). They should have been thronging with contrite people making their way to the temple in a corporate act of penitence. The prophet probably has in mind sometime during the siege when all that could be done to prepare for an onslaught by the enemy was done, and when the people used their leisure in the spirit of the modern saying, "You are a long time dead!"

Verse 14 is a strong denial of forgiveness. Probably at Jerusalem's temple the revelers slaughtered the animals used at their feasts, but no sacrifice will atone for this sin. Just when God's promises of protection are being so wonderfully fulfilled, the threat is given that the city will most certainly fall one day and that nothing, absolutely nothing, can avert God's judgment.

15 – 16 Terrifying as this threat of judgment undoubtedly is, it may seem to some to lose something of its horror because it is so general. After all, Jerusalem is a community; and when an act of judgment strikes a group of people, the individual may say to onself that he or she has simply been caught up in the

consequences of other people's sins. Isaiah allows no such escape route for the hardened conscience. The spiritual link between vv.1 – 14 and 15 – 25 is underlined by the use of the same great title for God in both sections. He is "the Lord, the LORD Almighty" (v.15; cf. v.12).

The spotlight of judgment is now directed toward one man, Shebna, the steward of the king's palace (cf. 36:3, 11, 22; 37:2). Motyer (1999, in loc.), commenting on the references to Shebna and Eliakim, insists that they provide "one of Isaiah's interim fulfillments in which observers could see the word of the Lord at work before their very eyes."

The pyramid tombs of the Pharaohs epitomize the desire of prominent people in the ancient Near East for a grandiose burying place to secure their adulation for centuries after their deaths (v.16). Julius II was tarred with the same brush in Michelangelo's day.

17 – 19 The NIV's "beware" (v.17) for *hinneh*m (NASB, "behold"), though somewhat free, does justice to the purpose of this call to Shebna to visualize the future scene, a prospect very different from the one he has planned. The words "O you mighty man" take him at his own self-estimate. God will show him who has the real power, for he will project him ignominiously out of his office and into another land (vv.18 – 19) — surely a reference to Assyria. The splendid tomb, hewn out at his order in some place of prominence, will then witness not to his greatness but to his overweening ambition, for he will lie dead in an alien land. He has probably paraded through Jerusalem's streets in ceremonial chariots (cf. 1Sa 15:1; 1Ki 1:5); he will now be seen not as the glory of his master, the king, but his disgrace.

The contempt felt for Shebna is summed up in the scornful expression "this steward" (v.15; cf. Jn 8:39). This has led many to suppose this oracle does not tell us the whole reason for this contempt and that allied to the official's ambition and pride is a political policy (probably pro-Egyptian) that runs counter to Isaiah's message for the king and the people to trust only in the Lord. This would certainly explain why this oracle is associated here with the one in vv.1 – 14.

20 – 23 Shebna had been seeking the praise of human beings. How much

better to have God's smile of approval and to be described, in a simple but eloquent phrase, as "my servant" (v.20; cf. 20:3; 42:1; 52:13). Eliakim — also, like Shebna, mentioned in 36:3, 11, 22, and 37:2 — was to take over Shebna's office and have his ceremonial robes (22:21; see comment on 36:3 for a discussion of the relative status of the two men). The word "father" suggests both his authority over Jerusalem's people and the provision he will make for them in virtue of his office.Verse 22 is not figurative but literal, for the steward will have the palace's large master key fastened to the shoulder of his tunic. This passes into symbol in the NT at Revelation 3:7 (cf. Mt 16:19; 18:18).

The simile of v.23 and the metaphor that follows it have different functions. The first may be a tent peg (though its use changes in vv.24 – 25), giving stability to the kingdom (cf. 33:20).Through him his whole family will advance in social dignity, being promoted, as it were, to a seat closer to the throne at the royal table.

Eliakim probably had a different policy from Shebna's, one more in line with Isaiah's counsel to trust in God. If so, then, his advice to the king would help to secure a real, not just an apparent strength to the nation in a time of international insecurity.

24 – 25 The oracle's mood changes dramatically. The true honor of "my servant" (v.20) is replaced by a satirical picture showing almost as much contempt as that shown toward Shebna in vv.15 – 19. Shebna's great sin was pride, but Eliakim's is nepotism. A legitimate honor will inevitably come to those related to a family head with a high position, but Eliakim has been chosen for office because of his own qualities, not theirs.

Isaiah plays on the double meaning of *kābôd*, translated "honor" in v.23 and "glory" in v.24. It may also signify weight. The peg does not now give strength to the tent but is fastened to the wall of the palace kitchen with a motley assortment of kitchen vessels hanging from it — the vessels Zechariah perhaps had in mind in his vision of the elevation of the common for holy use (Zec 14:21). The temptations of high office are many, and those who occupy them need the prayers of God's people.

NOTES

1 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see Note at 13:1.

6 Kir can hardly be identical with "Kir in Moab" (15:1) but rather with that mentioned in three other verses (2Ki 16:9; Am 1:5; 9:7), in each case in connection with Syria. Its location cannot be established with certainty.

9 The NEB translates, "you filled all the many pools in the City of David" instead of "you saw that the City of David had many breaches in its defenses." The former is based on repointing רְאִיתֶם from *rᵉʾitem* ("you saw") to *rᵉʾitem* ("you filled").This involves understanding y[eyqiB] (בְּקִיעֵי (*bᵉqiʿê*, "breaches") as scooped-out reservoirs. This is feasible, but the MT makes good sense, especially as vv.9 – 10 then assume an AB – AB pattern, with references to the defenses and the water supply juxtaposed twice. For the topography of vv.9 – 11, see Note on 7:3.

13 This verse may quote a current proverb. It is itself quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:32.

15 Shebna is described as "the secretary" in 36:3. The office he has here seems comparable to the Moslem "grand vizier," the Frankish "mayor of the palace," or the former English "chamberlain." The official in charge of the royal buildings and supplies undoubtedly had considerable and probably increasing power (see H. J. Katzenstein, "The Royal Steward," *IEJ* 10 [1960]: 149ff.).

16 Motyer (1993, in loc.) notes that the NIV emends the MT's "his grave" to "your grave" without manuscript grounds and points out that Hebrew often follows a vocative with a third person statement, "So here," he says, "the literal translation, 'one hewing his grave . . . !', has the force in context of 'that you should arrogate to yourself the right to be one who. . . .'"

M. Prophecy against Tyre (23:1 – 18)

OVERVIEW

A number of small countries — some little more than city-states — have had disproportionate influence because of their fine harbors and strong commercial instincts and skills. Venice, Genoa, and the cities of the Hanseatic League are examples from the past, while Singapore and the Netherlands, with its great port of Rotterdam, are modern examples. Phoenicia, with its two important ports of Tyre and Sidon, was the maritime commercial state contemporary with much of OT history.

Like all Israel's and Judah's neighbors Phoenicia was pagan; and the worship of Melkart, the Tyrian Baal, had posed a serious religious threat in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. Mauchline (in loc.) writes, "The Phoenicians, with their accumulated wealth and their blatant materialism, represented the very type of culture against whose vices Amos in particular warned the Israelites." Until the time of the Assyrians, who had designs on the whole Mediterranean seaboard and its hinterland, Phoenicia had been left relatively undisturbed by conflict. It certainly merited judgment, however, and would experience this at the hands of the Assyrians, just like all the other states in the area.

It was Sennacherib, during the period 705 – 701 BC, who turned his attention to Phoenicia, which had been a nominal part of the Assyrian Empire for some time. The country was devastated, and Tyre itself subjected to a long, bitter siege. Later it was also besieged by the Babylonians and Persians, and the Greeks under Alexander the Great virtually destroyed it in 333 BC after one of history's greatest sieges. It may be that the fulfillment of the prophecy involved some of these later times as well as that of the Assyrian onslaught. Oswalt, 1:299, pointing out that the imagery applied to Babylon in Revelation is particularly drawn from the description of Tyre here (Rev 17:1 – 6), goes on to say:

> The recognition that Babylon was at the eastern end of the civilized world while Tyre was at the

west, along with the highly symbolic language applied to each, suggests a bracketing effect which underlines the point of the unit: all human pride and accomplishment are under God's judgment.

1 An oracle concerning Tyre:
Wail, O ships of Tarshish!
For Tyre is destroyed
and left without house or harbor.
From the land of Cyprus
word has come to them.
2 Be silent, you people of the island
and you merchants of Sidon,
whom the seafarers have enriched.
3 On the great waters
came the grain of the Shihor;
the harvest of the Nile was the revenue of Tyre,
and she became the marketplace of the nations.
4 Be ashamed, O Sidon, and you, O fortress of the sea,
for the sea has spoken:
"I have neither been in labor nor given birth;
I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters."
5 When word comes to Egypt,
they will be in anguish at the report from Tyre.
6 Cross over to Tarshish;
wail, you people of the island.
7 Is this your city of revelry,
the old, old city,
whose feet have taken her
to settle in far-off lands?
8 Who planned this against Tyre,
the bestower of crowns,
whose merchants are princes,
whose traders are renowned in the earth?
9 The LORD Almighty planned it,
to bring low the pride of all glory
and to humble all who are renowned on the earth.
10 Till your land as along the Nile,
O Daughter of Tarshish, for you no longer have a harbor.
11 The LORD has stretched out his hand over the sea
and made its kingdoms tremble.
He has given an order concerning Phoenicia
that her fortresses be destroyed.
12 He said,"No more of your reveling,
O Virgin Daughter of Sidon, now crushed!
"Up, cross over to Cyprus;
even there you will fi nd no rest."
13 Look at the land of the Babylonians,

this people that is now of no account!
The Assyrians have made it
a place for desert creatures;
they raised up their siege towers,
they stripped its fortresses bare
and turned it into a ruin.
14 Wail, you ships of Tarshish;
your fortress is destroyed!
15 At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life.
But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute:
16 "Take up a harp, walk through the city,
O prostitute forgotten;
play the harp well, sing many a song,
so that you will be remembered."
17 At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth. 18 Yet her profit and her earnings will be set apart for the LORD; they will not be stored up or hoarded. Her profi ts will go to those who live before the LORD, for abundant food and fi ne clothes.

COMMENTARY

1 – 5 The Phoenicians had several colonies and dependent trading-stations in the Mediterranean. Tarshish (v.1), probably in Spain (cf. Notes), and some of the cities of Cyprus were among these. Ships returning from Tarshish would call at Cyprus before completing their journey to Tyre. At Cyprus they would hear that their harbor had been destroyed, so they would not be able to complete their journey.

Sidon (v.2) alternated with Tyre as the chief port of the land. The Phoenicians had special commercial links with Egypt, and no doubt many a Tyrian or Sidonian vessel carried large quantities of grain from the fields of Shihor (v.3) in the Nile Valley. These commercial ties with Egypt were viewed with considerable suspicion by the Assyrians and the rulers of the various world empires that succeeded them, for Egypt was usually the final major enemy to be overcome before mastery of the Fertile Crescent and the eastern Mediterranean could be achieved.

Both vocatives in v.4 apply to Sidon. Appropriately the sea is personified as the mother of the Phoenicians. With the slaughter of so many Sidonians by Assyria, Sidon is bereft of her children and is left as though she never had them.

The sadness of the sea is matched by that of Egypt (v.5), whose trading links with Tyre and Sidon and, perhaps, her own danger from the same source will give her sympathy.

6 – 9 The prophet next turns to the people of the nearest Phoenician colony, Cyprus (cf. v.8 with vv.1 – 2). They are to take the news westward to Tarshish (v.6) or even, perhaps, to flee there. The tone of these verses is a shade less mocking than the taunts against Babylon in chs. 13 – 14. Nevertheless, the prophet contrasts Tyre's past gaiety and wide-flung colonization and commercialism (v.7) with its current humbling under the mighty hand of God (v.9).

No doubt all the rulers of world empires from Assyria onward will plan to deal with Tyre on their way to other victories, but her downfall is really the Lord's work, for his counsels ultimately prevail in human affairs. Isaiah never tires of saying that God is opposed to human pride in its every form. It is no accident that one of his illustrations of this is "the cedars of Lebanon" (2:13) that graced the mountain slopes behind Tyre and Sidon.

10 – 12a These verses develop the theocentric theme of vv.6 – 9. The Phoenicians are warned that their trading links with Tarshish and Egypt should not induce complacency in them in the face of the threat of divine judgment. It was Tarshish Jonah was making for, but he could not evade the hand of the Lord (Jnh 1:3 – 4). That hand (cf. Isa 5:25; 10:4; 31:3) — which had been stretched out over the Red Sea in judgment on the Egyptians in the time of Moses — is stretched out now even over the Mediterranean. No kingdom on its coasts can reckon itself immune from God's righteous wrath.

12b – 14 Erlandsson, 99, rightly describes v.13 as a *crux interpretum*. He quotes Buhl as holding that the verse "defies any explanation" and Gray as declaring it to be "quite unintelligible," and he points out that Fohrer passes over it in silence. Concerning the words, "Look at the land of the Babylonians," Clements (in loc.) says, "The phrase is undoubtedly a later addition made after the period of Assyrian domination had passed and reapplying the lament to Tyre in the Babylonian era." There is, however, no need for us to take this view.

If the NIV is correct (see Notes), the verse makes excellent literary and

historical sense. If the prophecy is from 703 or a little after, it can refer to the ferocious attack of Sennacherib. If it must be dated a few years earlier, it could refer to Sargon II's campaign against the Chaldeans in 710. Both events predated Sennacherib's attack on Tyre in 701. Neither Tyre nor even Cyprus, across the sea, can be regarded as a haven of safety when Assyria, the instrument of God's wrath (cf. 10:5 – 11), is on the rampage.Verse 14 picks up language from vv.6 and 11 to provide a final lament.

15 – 18 Many of Isaiah's oracles have a surprising end, so often a word of grace (cf. 8:16 – 9:7; 19:1 – 25; 42:18 – 43:13). This, however, differs from many of the others. Here there is a partial reprieve, with a new period of commercial success for Tyre, but now to supply the needs of the house of God in Jerusalem.

The period of seventy years (v.15) is familiar to readers of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 25:11 – 12; 29:10). There it refers to the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, while here it applies to Tyre. Erlandsson, 102, is surely correct when he says, "If one is looking for an interval of seventy years during which Tyre's trade was crippled, the period which immediately comes to mind is that between the years 700 and 630 when Assyria did not permit Tyre to engage in any business activity. When Assyria's hold over Palestine came to an end around 630, most of the western states were enabled to flourish again, especially Judah and Tyre."

The symbolic picture of Babylon in the book of Revelation draws not only from "Babylon" prophecies in the OT but other oracles also, especially those against Tyre. The description of the great city as a prostitute probably owes something to this present passage. The comparison is appropriate, for the prostitute bedecks herself in gaudy finery and enters into a commercial transaction with her clients (v.17). Seaports have always been particularly notorious for their prostitutes. Tyre was an old, old city (cf. v.7) and so would need to attract her clients now by singing some song associated with her trade.

There is an important link here between the oracles against the nations (which come to their conclusion here) and the range of prophecies that occur later in the book, in the sections often attributed to so-called Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah. All three major parts of the book contain the notion that Gentiles will come up to Jerusalem, not only to worship (cf. 2:1 – 5; 49:6 – 7; 60:1) but also to

make their treasures available for the use of the chosen people and in the temple of God (cf. 18:7; 45:14; 49:22 – 23; 60:9 – 14). This motif, therefore, gives a further change of tone to the final verse of the oracle. God's ultimate plan for Tyre — as for Ethiopia, Egypt, and Assyria (cf. 18:7; 19:18 – 25) — is to bring her into line with his central purpose for Israel. Once before, in the days of Solomon, material from Israel's northern neighbor had been used in the ser vice of the temple (cf. 1Ki 5:1 – 12). This will happen again.

NOTES

1 On מַשָּׂא (*maśśāʾ*, "oracle"), see Note at 13:1. For "ships of Tarshish," see Note at 2:16. Tarshish is usually identified as Tarsessos at the mouth of the Guadalquiver in Spain. For other suggestions, see Young (in loc.). "Cyprus" translates כִּתִּים (*kittîm*) and is certainly correct.

2 The island referred to here could be Cyprus, mentioned in v.1, or it could be the small island on which New Tyre was built. The latter is the more likely, as it forms a sense-rhythm couplet with the next line with its reference to Phoenicia's other seaport.

8 Why is Tyre called "the bestower of crowns" here? Perhaps it is a reference to the measure of self-government given by Tyre to her various overseas colonies.

9 Instead of "to bring low the pride of all glory and to humble all who are renowned on the earth," 1Qlsa reads "to humble every proud one, to bring greatness into contempt — all the earth's most honored ones" (cf. *BHS*).

10 All the longer commentaries discuss the difficulties of this verse.The NIV follows the LXX and lQIsa, reading עִבְדוּ (*ʿibdû*, "work") — instead of the MT's עִבְרִי (*ʿibrî*, "Go through," followed by NASB) — and yielding the sense, "Till your land." The particle כְּ (*kᵉ*) is then understood slightly differently, so that the whole clause becomes, "Till your land as along the Nile." The NASB follows the MT in reading מֵזַח (*mēzaḥ*,., "restraint"), so rendering "there is no more restraint"; but the NIV emends to מָזַח (*mēzaḥ*, , "har-bor") and translates as "for you no longer

have a harbor." This means that the people of Tarshish would need to take to agriculture. With the Phoenician harbors no longer available and Egyptian grain no longer coming to their own port, they must become internally self-sufficient.The NASB's rendering suggests that Tarshish, as a Phoenician colony, felt her link with the mother city to be a restraint, and she was encouraged to develop independently. In fact this makes good sense, so it should probably be followed.

11 "Phoenicia" here is literally "Canaan," which the Phoenicians in fact used to describe their own land. Everywhere else in the OT this word is used of the eastern Mediterranean seaboard region generally or of that part ultimately inhabited by Israel.

15 The words "the span of a king's life" are not easy to understand. Some try to apply them to a particular monarch, while others consider they apply to a dynasty rather than to an individual king. They could mean that the days have been fixed by a king and so are unalterable, with the implication, possibly, that God is the sovereign who has so decreed matters.

16 The light dance rhythm used for the prostitute's song contrasts dramatically — and tellingly — with the limping beat of the lament (cf. comment at 1:21 – 23) in other parts of the oracle.

III. God and the Whole World (24:1 – 27:13)

OVERVIEW

These chapters — often known, rightly or wrongly, as "The Isaiah Apocalypse" — have elicited much scholarly debate. W. R. Millar (*Isaiah 24 – 27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic* [Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976]) surveys the main approaches to these chapters. Crucial to understanding any literature is the question of literary genre. He writes (21), "Within this century, scholars have labelled the literary genre of Isaiah 24 – 27 as a late postexilic apocalyptic work, preexilic prophetic judgment literature, prophetic eschatology, exilic or early

postexilic proto-apocalyptic and, recently, early apocalyptic." Since his book, however, many scholars have moved closer in their viewpoints, so that already in 1986 Oswalt (in loc.) could say, "there is now general agreement that the material is not truly apocalyptic, however that may be defined, but more correctly eschatological."

The matter of genre affects the dating of the material. Apocalyptic is widely regarded as, in general, later than prophecy. Prophecy is said to view the eschatological future in historical terms, with emphasis on particular places and nations, while apocalyptic thinks cosmically and in terms of direct divine intervention in human affairs. Apocalyptic paints the future on a wider canvas than prophecy, with more startling colors but with less specific detail. This is said to be the product of wider thinking than what characterized the prophets and is often attributed to contact with Persian apocalyptic eschatology, to which Jews were not exposed until the end of the exile. If all this is true, these four chapters cannot be by Isaiah. They are even sometimes considered the latest in the book.

This whole viewpoint, however, is questionable. It depends totally on a particular view of the chronological relationship between the two genres, but the line of distinction between the two can be too rigidly drawn. Chapters 24 – 27 cannot be put firmly in the one category or the other. They have a strong universal note, but also there are particular references to peoples and places, so that there is no complete break with history. Some places mentioned in chs. 13 – 23 are referred to here (cf. esp. 25:10; 27:12 – 13). Some scholars, noting the apparent mixture of genres here, have assumed different authors and periods. Yet we will find an internal unity here. The judgment of Miscall, 64 – 65, is worth noting:

> Although the chapters do stand apart, they are closely connected with the rest of Isaiah in style, vocabulary,imagery and themes.The chanting style is an intensification of the style found, for example, in 13 and 15 – 16; the repetition and piling up of words and images may be more striking in these chapters, but they are not unique to them.

(The reader who wishes to pursue these questions in detail should consult especially Millar, *Isaiah 24 – 27*; G. W. Anderson, *Isaiah 24 – 27 Reconsidered* [VTSup 9; Leiden: Brill, 1962], 118 – 26; D. G. Johnson, *An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24 – 27* [Sheffi eld: Sheffi eld Academic Press, 1988]; and, more briefly, Sweeney, 313 – 16.)

This commentary takes the view that the chapters are the genuine work of Isaiah, that they constitute a unity, and that they stand on the border between prophetic eschatology and apocalyptic. It is fitting for them to depict the future in cosmic terms without losing contact with the historical, for they bring to a fitting climax a long series of oracles concerning various nations. If the book has been arranged with great care, as seems to be the case (cf. Introduction, pp. 459 – 61), nothing could be more appropriate.

A. The Judgment of the World (24:1 – 23)

OVERVIEW

This chapter, which speaks of universal judgment, is fundamental to the three that follow it and, as Oswalt (in loc.) and others point out, functions as a transition between chs. 13 – 23 and 25 – 27. Not only is no reference yet made to particular nations or specific historical events; it does not even restrict the judgment to the earth. So it sums up all the judgments on particular nations predicted in chs. 13 – 23 and goes beyond them.

Some writers, however, take quite different views of this chapter. Watts (in loc.) translates *ʾereṣ* in all of its many occurrences in this chapter as "land" rather than "earth." This Hebrew word covers both meanings, so the context must always decide. He considers this chapter a continuation of the oracle against Tyre in ch. 23 and that the "land" here is the hinterland of Tyre, embracing the whole of Syria/ Palestine. This has some plausibility in vv.1 – 3, and we note the somewhat commercial atmosphere of v.2, which would fit Tyre, but the poetic parallelism of *ʾereṣ* and *tebel* ("world") in v.3 fits the wider reference much better, and the many echoes of Genesis 1 – 11 (noted also by Watts) in the chapter, with the increasingly cosmic language of the final verses (although he translates "the army of the highlands" instead of "the powers in the heavens above" in v.21), mean that even if the chapter begins locally, it moves swiftly to the universal.

D. G. Johnson (*An Integrative Reading of Isaiah 24 – 27* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988]) sees its time of origin as the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC and its message as focused on a specific city (v.12), which he identifies as Babylon. W. J. Dumbrell ("The Purpose of the Book of Isaiah," *TynBul* 36 [1985]: 119) thinks it is Jerusalem, though he agrees that it could be Babylon. Blen-kinsopp, 346 – 47, referring to chs. 13 – 23, thinks the doom of the cities mentioned there prefigures the general doom announced here:

> If this is so, we would be led to suspect that the anonymity of the doomed city often referred to in

this section (24:10, 12; 25:2 – 3; 26:5; 27:10) is deliberate and that it represents a kind of composite of the named cities in the previous section or a symbolic Babylon as the embodiment of opposition and hostility to Yahweh's purposes (as much later in Rev 14:8; 18:2, 10).

This would make chs. 24 – 27 a most important anticipation of the last book of the Bible. I take it that, in one way or another, a universal reference is intended and will seek to show that this gives coherence to these chapters.

1 See, the LORD is going to lay waste the earth
and devastate it;
he will ruin its face
and scatter its inhabitants —
2 it will be the same
for priest as for people,
for master as for servant,
for mistress as for maid,
for seller as for buyer,
for borrower as for lender,
for debtor as for creditor.
3 The earth will be completely laid waste
and totally plundered.
The LORD has spoken this word.
4 The earth dries up and withers,
the world languishes and withers,
the exalted of the earth languish.
5 The earth is defiled by its people;
they have disobeyed the laws,
violated the statutes
and broken the everlasting covenant.
6 Therefore a curse consumes the earth;
its people must bear their guilt.
Therefore earth's inhabitants are burned up,
and very few are left.
7 The new wine dries up and the vine withers;
all the merrymakers groan.
8 The gaiety of the tambourines is stilled,
the noise of the revelers has stopped,
the joyful harp is silent.
9 No longer do they drink wine with a song;
the beer is bitter to its drinkers.
10 The ruined city lies desolate;
the entrance to every house is barred.
11 In the streets they cry out for wine;
all joy turns to gloom,
all gaiety is banished from the earth.

12 The city is left in ruins,
    its gate is battered to pieces.
13 So will it be on the earth
    and among the nations,
as when an olive tree is beaten,
    or as when gleanings are left after the grape harvest.
14 They raise their voices, they shout for joy;
    from the west they acclaim the LORD's majesty.
15 Therefore in the east give glory to the LORD;
    exalt the name of the LORD, the God of Israel,
    in the islands of the sea.
16 From the ends of the earth we hear singing:
    "Glory to the Righ teous One."
But I said, "I waste away, I waste away!
    Woe to me!
The treacherous betray!
    With treachery the treacherous betray!"
17 Terror and pit and snare await you,
    O people of the earth.
18 Whoever flees at the sound of terror
    will fall into a pit;
whoever climbs out of the pit
    will be caught in a snare.
The floodgates of the heavens are opened,
    the foundations of the earth shake.
19 The earth is broken up,
    the earth is split asunder,
    the earth is thoroughly shaken.
20 The earth reels like a drunkard,
    it sways like a hut in the wind;
so heavy upon it is the guilt of its rebellion
    that it falls — never to rise again.
21 In that day the LORD will punish
    the powers in the heavens above
    and the kings on the earth below.
22 They will be herded together
    like prisoners bound in a dungeon;
they will be shut up in prison
    and be punished after many days.

23 The moon will be abashed, the sun ashamed;
for the LORD Almighty will reign

on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
    and before its elders, gloriously.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 These verses form a fitting introduction to the chapter. They call for inner vision ("see"; v.1), for the prophet is eager for his hearers to share what he has been given (cf. 1:1). Despite the many distinctions in v.2, these verses are general in character. A universal judgment on the earth is proclaimed, affecting all, regardless of their status.

What kind of disaster does the prophet have in mind here? The Hebrew participle *bôqēq* ("lay waste") signifies emptying, and a second participle, *bôlʿqâ*, has a similar sense, a striking example of assonance in true Isaianic fashion.

This emptying is amplified when the prophet says, "He will ruin its face" ("distorts its surface," NASB). Perhaps this is an earthquake, with the inhabitants scattered by the violence of the tremor, or perhaps extreme drought (cf. v.7), so that the earth's surface is dried up and cracked. There are some points of affinity with our Lord's eschatological teaching in Mark 13 where earthquakes and famine — often caused by drought — are mentioned (cf. Mk 13:8).

Isaiah seems to have had early Genesis in mind here. At the Tower of Babel judgment, the people were scattered (cf. Ge 11:9); this happens again. God's judgment will be indiscriminate, affecting all strata of society, with no religious, social, or economic distinctions making any difference (v.2).The affirmation that God has spoken (v.3) underlines the certainty of these judgments. They are so terrifying and so universal that some such assurance is needed.

4 – 6 These verses are characterized by a strong moral tone. The true and living God carries out his judgments on moral principles rather than as the expression of an arbitrary will. If human beings experience his righteous wrath, it is because their actions and way of life are contrary to his will.

Translations of v.4 differ somewhat. The RSV translates, "the heavens languish together with the earth," instead of the NIV's "the exalted of the earth languish." The word *mʿrôm*(NIV, "exalted"; RSV, "heavens") really means "height," so the NIV is to be preferred here. This verse teaches one side of the truth presented in v.2, a truth taught in 2:11 – 17 and elsewhere in Isaiah.

Modern society is concerned about the physical pollution of our environment. Isaiah here deals with the still more tragic and urgent matter of moral pollution, which is as widespread and serious today as in the prophet's day. Many commentators (e.g., Young, O. Kaiser, and Seitz) see a reference to the Noachian covenant in v.5, especially in the phrase "the everlasting covenant," which also occurs in Genesis 9:16. Perhaps, too, the prophet has Genesis 3 in mind, particularly in view of his reference to "a curse" in v.6. The world as a whole did not possess God's moral commandments in written form as in the Mosaic law, but those laws do represent God's will for humankind, and it is under judgment for their violation. The word "disobeyed" (v.5) implies some awareness of these moral requirements in the conscience (cf. Ro 1:18 – 32; 2:11 – 16), suggesting an element of deliberateness in sin.

As suggested already, the curse of v.6 reminds the reader of Genesis 3:17 – 19. The judgment on the original sin has already been passed, of course, and what is in view now is an eschatological judgment on the whole race after many centuries of disobedience to God. The earth — at the beginning placed under human dominion — has already been cursed and bears the scars of human folly. Bearing guilt, of course, means suffering its consequences and so experiencing punishment at the hand of God.

Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) warns us, however, despite the chapter's flood motifs, not to tie this reference exclusively to the covenant with Noah, for "everlasting covenant" is applied in the OT to several covenants (Ge 9:16; Ps 105:10; 1Sa 23:5; Isa 55:3; 61:8). In line with this, Kissane (in loc.) remarks that although the terms used are universal, the prophet is thinking particularly of the way this judgment affects Israel.

7 – 9 Although the judgment is universal, it appears to be carried out on earth, like many of the judgments in Revelation, and a remnant of humankind survives it. (See the Introduction, pp. 450 – 52, for the general interpretation of this kind of proph-ecy.) What is the logical and chronological relationship between vv.7 – 9 and 10 – 13? Are they about a further though milder judgment that will fall on those still left on earth, like the one in 6:12 – 13, which fell on Judah? Possibly, though these verses may deal with the same judgment as vv.1 – 6, but in more detailed terms and perhaps in its first stages. The drying up of the world (v.4)

certainly relates well to the withering of the vine.

The Genesis curse had affected the plant world and thus the man, whose daily work took him into the fields (Ge 3:17 – 19). Here, again under the curse of judgment, the focus is on the vineyards, so that little wine is available and what is produced is bitter to the taste. The instrumental music and singing that often accompany bouts of drinking are heard no more (v.8).All the joy seems to have gone out of life (v.9), for the God of judgment is abroad.

10 – 13 There are several references to "the city" in chs. 24 – 27 (see esp. 25:2 – 3; 26:5; 27:10 – 11), and there have been many attempts to identify it with some particular city, especially Jerusalem or Babylon or an unnamed Moabite city (cf. 25:10). Hayes and Irvine, 296, think it is the fortified Assyrian citadel in Jerusalem. Clements (in loc.) has well commented:

> There is a complete lack of any specific national reference and none of the activities which are pursued within the city differentiate it in any special way. It can best be understood, therefore, as a pictorial description of the body of organized human society, a type of "Vanity Fair," which is to be subjected to the divine judgment. When God asserts his will in judgment he will bring to an end the existing human order, so that in a sense every city will be brought to chaos.

These passages, therefore, in a manner consistent with their eschatological setting, prepare the way for the symbolic use of Babylon in the book of Revelation. (See also the discussion of the issue in Seitz [*Isaiah 1:39*, 172 – 79].)

The city is in ruins, and the entrances to all of its standing houses are blocked, either because there is so much rubble in the streets or because a spirit of fear has gripped the hearts of its remaining inhabitants, who secure themselves within their houses in the hope that they will be safe from judgment (cf. 2:19, 21).Those still out in the streets are overtaken by a spirit of gloom, symbolized by lack of wine (cf. vv.7 – 9).

In 17:6, Isaiah, in dealing with the judgment of Ephraim (in league with Damascus), likened the tiny remnant remaining after judgment to a few olive berries left on the remotest branches of a tree that had been beaten during harvest to secure the maximum yield. He uses the same image here but now in relation to the whole world.

14 – 16a A feature of chs. 24 – 27 that reminds us of Revelation is the way declarations of coming judgment are interspersed with songs of thanksgiving. The first such song occurs here. There has been a great judgment, but God has not made a full end to the earth's population. Those who remain lift up their voices in grateful praise to him (v.14). But who are they? Jews? Gentiles? Both? The verbs of v.14 have no explicit subject, so in grammatical terms the question remains open. We cannot settle it for certain in the light of the wider context, for Isaiah provides other examples both of Jews (12:3 – 6) and Gentiles (42:10 – 13) giving praise to God from the ends of the earth. What favors Gentiles is the reference to "islands of the sea" (v.15), not normally associated in the OT with a Jewish dispersion. In fact, later in the book the phrase often refers to Gentiles considered collectively (cf. 41:5; 42:4, 10; et al.). The Lord's description as "the God of Israel" is also slightly in favor of a reference to the Gentiles.

What begins as a purely factual statement (v.14) becomes an exhortation (v.15) before emerging again as an affirmation, implying that the exhortation has been heeded. The prophet hears the song first in the west. He calls on those in the east also to blend their voices in harmony of praise to the Lord. As a result, the praises of Israel's God ascend on all sides. Perhaps the conversion of Egypt and Assyria (19:23 – 25) can be taken as an earnest or a symbol of this.

16b – 20 The welcome interlude of praise is over. In the perspective of chs. 24 – 27 as a whole, we may see it fulfilling a special function. These chapters contain several songs of praise, and we would expect something like this here, for this chapter is fundamental to this whole section of the book. A balanced picture of the future in the Bible, as seen most clearly in Revelation, contains notes of both judgment and salvation; and the most fitting occupation of the redeemed is praise to the Redeemer. But though this is true, we must not overlook the solemn fact that more space is given in Scripture to future judgment — a warning to the heedless — than to future salvation. So the prophet resumes the threatening tone of the earlier part of his oracle.

Before the threats in v.17, however, the prophet lifts his voice, not in praise but in great sadness. Most modern translations give the impression that v.16b begins with an adversative particle, "but." This is not the case. It is a simple narrative conjunction, normally translated "and," so that there is no emphasis on

a change of mood.This seems strange, for clearly the prophet is crying out in grief. Perhaps to him his present sorrowful attitude is continuous with the future song of praise, for both are motivated by desire for the Lord's glory. Expressing gratitude to God for his grace and showing sorrowful concern about the treacherous acts of human beings are both manifestations of a godly character.

In Isaiah's day the international scene was dominated by Assyria. We think of international law as a comparatively modern phenomenon, but the ancient Near East had its conventions and treaties. Aggression is never welcome, but married to treachery it is to be doubly feared. The prophet felt a deep horror as he thought about this, and he identified with his people's fear. The words in v.16 "The treacherous betray! With treachery the treacherous betray!" represent only five Hebrew words. The exceptional paronomasia here is best appreciated when the words are read aloud: *bōgᵉdîm bāgādû ûbeged bôgᵉdîm bāgādû.* Remember, God told Joshua the book of the law should not depart from his *mouth* (Jos 1:8)!

Some reckon that vv.17 – 18 continue to describe the effects of Assyrian aggression on the nations. In support they point out that the wordplay that characterized v.16 is also found in v.17. The repetition of ,ʾereṣ. ("earth") in vv.17 – 20, however, seems to bind all four verses together. In fact, there is thematic unity even if v.16b relates to the present and the remainder to the future, for the prophet may be saying the present Assyrian scourge will be replaced by an even greater, more widespread judgment.The Lord is the divine Hunter, who pursues his guilty prey inexorably to a kill. There is no escape from his judgment (v.18a; cf. Heb 2:1 – 3).

Frequently in Isaiah's prophecy an image appears for illustrative purposes, then disappears quickly, being replaced by another, then another, and then still another. The hearer was therefore without excuse as God's revelation took up much that was familiar and used it to illuminate and press home the truth.

The image of the hunt (v.18a) is replaced by the flood (v.18b), with undoubted allusion to the judgment of the flood (cf. Ge 7:11). We must not be guilty of insensitive literalism here. In fact, the prophet's language is twice removed from the literal; for we can be sure that neither he nor the author of Genesis actually believed heaven was fitted out with sluice gates or windows, nor does Isaiah seem to be thinking of an actual worldwide flood here. The promise had been

given that such a flood — destroying virtually all life — would never happen again (Ge 9:11 – 17). The language of the flood was still appropriate, however, to represent pictorially — which Isaiah is doing here — other great acts of judgment.

The whole earthly order is proved to be unstable (v.19), as though some colossal earthquake has taken hold of it (cf. Rev 6:12; 8:15; 11:13; 16:18). Evidently all that can be is being shaken (cf. Heb 12:26 – 29). The drunken man and the swaying hut both symbolize total instability (v.20). Instability in every realm — physical, international, and religious — is a feature of the signs of Jesus' second advent given in Mark 13. The calamities that overtake the earth are not merely natural but are traced to their spiritual cause in universal rebellion. The prophet had already used the image of a hut (1:8), though somewhat differently, to describe the divinely ordained effects of rebellion against God. The same basic figure can be used flexibly to teach different lessons.

21 – 23 The vision of judgment, which already included the whole earth, now becomes even wider, encompassing the powers of heaven as well as the kings of the earth (v.21).The term *ṣebāʾ*, ("powers") is sometimes used of the heavenly bodies (translated "host" in 34:4; 40:26; 45:12), sometimes of the angelic armies (1Ki 22:19; 2Ch 18:18). Which is in view here? On the basis of Isaiah's use of the word elsewhere, we might understand it of the stars here, but punishment implies personal beings; so, despite the reference to other heavenly bodies in v.23, it probably applies to fallen angels (cf. Eph 6:12).The two sets of powers — in heaven and on earth — are at one in being rebels but also in the possession of authority. Rebellion in an authority figure is serious, for such a one may well drag others down as well. Isaiah 14 pictures the great king of Babylon descending to Sheol. Here apparently both the heavenly and earthly rebels are confined in some kind of prison (cf. 2Pe 2:4; Jude 6; Rev 20:1 – 3).

Does the phrase "after many days" (v.22) refer to the millennium? Certainly it harmonizes with a premillennial interpretation of Revelation 20. There the spiritual powers of evil are bound in prison during Christ's earthly reign, after which they — along with the unsaved dead — suffer eternal punishment in the lake of fire. The expression is remarkable because imprisonment may have been taken as a figure for final punishment rather than as its anticipation (see Notes).

The closing verse (v.23) contains two notable features. The sun and moon were created by God to rule the day and the night (Ge 1:16 – 17). Ruling (cf. Ge 1:18, 26, 28), with its implication of authority, may suggest that "host" can apply to both heavenly bodies and angelic beings (see comment on v.21) since there is a relationship between them, with parts of the visible universe representing the spheres of authority of unseen heavenly beings. This may be reading too much into such an expression, but, whether or not this is true, the prophet pictures the two great heavenly bodies hiding their lights in shame when the Lord exercises direct rule in Jerusalem. All other glory is his gift and simply reflects his glory, and one day it will become clear that there can be no rival to him (cf. Rev 21:23).

The language of locality in v.23 may be literal or symbolic, in the latter case forming a link with the new Jerusalem of Revelation. The reference to elders here perhaps recalls Exodus 24:9 – 11. The vision of Revelation also shows twenty-four elders, probably representing the redeemed under the old and new covenants, before the throne of God (Rev 4:4). Calvin (in loc.) says, "Then only does God receive his just rights, and the honour due to him, when all creatures are placed in subjection, and he alone shines before our eyes."

NOTES

5 חֹק (*ḥōq*; GK 2976), translated "statutes," is really singular; yet תּוֹרֹת (*tôrōt*, GK 9368) is plural. Because the terms often appear as virtual synonyms in the OT (e.g., in Ps 119), the reader is inclined to assume this is the case here, but the difference of number requires explanation. The singular *ḥōq* could either contemplate the law as a complete entity (cf. Jas 2:10 – 11) or relate to the primeval commandment in Eden. Eschatological and apocalyptic language is appropriate to allude to the early chapters of Genesis. If the latter is its meaning, then the everlasting covenant may not refer simply to the Noachian covenant but to a covenant with Adam, which seems to be presupposed in Romans 5:12 – 21. D. C. Polaski's interesting intertextual study of this verse ("Reflections on a Mosaic Covenant: The Eternal Covenant (Isaiah 24:5) and Intertextuality," *JSOT* 77 [1998]: 55 – 73) does not consider this possibility.

10 The main attempts to identify the ruined city are summarized in Millar

(*Isaiah 24 – 27*), 15 – 21.

16 – 17 The comments in these verses mention the paronomasia found here. Some have used this phenomenon to argue against the Isaianic authorship of this chapter, or at least this part of it, because it seems somewhat heavy and crude. But Isaiah contains a great deal of paronomasia, and in Scripture style is the servant of the message, not its master. Certainly the wordplay is heavy here, but is this not appropriate to the point being made by the prophet?

22 פָּקַד (*pāqad;* GK 7212; "punished" in NIV) really means "to visit." It can bear the sense "to visit for deliverance"; but more often it refers to punishment, and this fits the context here. It is perhaps significant that few modern commentators, even those to whom the idea of a "Larger Hope" would probably be congenial, adopt the alternative rendering. The NIV's margin notes this sense ("released"), though the translators were convinced it should not be in the text.

B. Psalms and Predictions of Judgment and Salvation (25:1 – 12)

OVERVIEW

Motyer (1993, p. 132), says of chs. 25 – 27, “The whole is impressionistic, rhapsodic and full of song (24:16; 25:1 – 5; 26:1 – 6; 27:2); an eschatological cantata on the theme of world-wide overthrow and rectification.” These chapters are not easy to analyze. This is at least partly so because two types of literary genre occur here: the psalm of thanksgiving and the eschatological prophecy. There are, however, unifying concepts, giving a kind of oneness to this section, especially that of the city, while references to the mountain also have in view the city of Jerusalem as crowning Mount Zion. Isaiah 26:1 – 6 also has two references to the city, but we will see that other themes integrate that chapter.

The typical OT prophet is characteristically a descending rather than an ascending mediator; viz., he functions for God toward humanity, rather than for humanity toward God. This is not, however, the whole truth. Amos, for example, prayed for the people to whom his stern messages of judgment were addressed (Am 7:2, 5), and Micah virtually utters the praises of the God of mercy in his final three verses. Isaiah, however, goes beyond not only his predecessors and contemporaries but even his successors among the prophets in quantity of praise material. Although no song in the Psalter claims Isaiah as its author, we must reckon him a psalmist as well as a prophet. We saw this in ch. 12 and will see it again.

1 O LORD, you are my God;
I will exalt you and praise your name,
for in perfect faithfulness
you have done marvelous things,
things planned long ago.
2 You have made the city a heap of rubble,
the fortified town a ruin,
the foreigners’ stronghold a city no more;
it will never be rebuilt.
3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you;
cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

4 You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in his distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.
For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
5 and like the heat of the desert.
You silence the uproar of foreigners;
as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud,
so the song of the ruthless is stilled.
6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine —
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.
9 In that day they will say,
"Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."
10 The hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain;
but Moab will be trampled under him
as straw is trampled down in the manure.
11 They will spread out their hands in it,
as a swimmer spreads out his hands to swim.
God will bring down their pride
despite the cleverness of their hands.
12 He will bring down your high fortified walls
and lay them low;
he will bring them down to the ground,
to the very dust.

COMMENTARY

1 – 5 Isaiah's call came to him in the temple (ch. 6), where he must often have joined the worshipers in songs of praise. The language of the psalms was in his

heart, and psalter phraseology combined with new poetic material became for him a new vehicle of inspired praise. Perhaps these verses, given prophetically to Isaiah, like those that open ch. 26, are the future song of Judah. We notice, however, that 25:1 is in the first person singular while 26:1 is in the plural, so that we conclude that Isaiah's inspired praise here is intended to be his own.

This song may apply almost equally well to his day or to the eschatological future portrayed so vividly in the previous chapter. This is fitting, for God's activities at the end of time are all of a piece with what he does throughout history; and they provide a climax to the story of his dealings with humanity.

Like Israel's psalmists, the prophet displays a sense of personal relationship with God (v.1). The focus of his praise is not simply the acts of God but his faithfulness. Each act of God reveals his attributes and makes us aware of what he is in his perfect character. The word translated "marvelous" is *pele*,, which occurs — along with the verbal noun *yō̆ʿēṣ*. ("counselor," cognate with the verb translated "planned" here) — in one of the names of the messianic child in 9:6. The context there spoke of another day of Midian, when the rod of Israel's oppressor would be broken. Here Isaiah gives praise to God after describing his coming judgment on all the earth. The maleficent schemes and actions of people can never overturn God's sovereign purpose, eternal in conception, declared in his word, and executed in due time.

In our comment at 24:10 – 13, we accepted that references to a city of destruction in chs. 24 – 27 do not relate to any particular city but are general designations of society organized apart from any reference to God, an idea like the NT's use of "the world" in a depreciatory sense. Clements (in loc.) well says:

> The city whose destruction is foretold in 25:1 – 5 .. . stands as a thematic representation of the forces of evil arrayed against God's faithful people. Whatever may have been drawn, therefore, from the portrayal of the city of Babylon as the centre of such forces of evil, it must be understood as a symbol or representation of the larger reality of world evil and darkness.

Each city is a specific manifestation of the general city spirit, the organizing of life for human ends, not for the purposes of God. Such cities have often been brought down, and many will suffer future overthrow (cf. 40:23 – 24).

Note the logical word “therefore” in v.3. God’s judgment of these cities leads strong, ruthless nations to honor and revere the Lord. Young (in loc.) comments:

> We must not overlook the profound theological teaching that if the Gentiles are to worship God their own united power must be destroyed. As long as the Gentile nations, represented in Isaiah’s day by the Assyrians and Babylonians, sought to control the world and to incorporate the theocracy within their own kingdom, there could be no hope for their salvation. Babylon and all that it represented must first be destroyed.

The destruction of every hope in humanity makes way for penitent hope in God.

The psalms often extol Israel’s God as the refuge and shelter of his people (see, e.g., Ps 61:2 – 4, where various figures express the truth that God is the safety of his people). Verse 4 uses three words for this concept; the first one (“refuge”) is repeated to stress that thought. As in v.2 this is stated as an accomplished fact, either because it is now history or because, in God’s purpose and pledge, it is a future certainty. If these words were written after 701 BC, the prophet probably has Jerusalem’s deliverance from Sennacherib in mind.

The “poor” and the “needy” (v.4) contrast strongly with the “strong” and “ruthless nations” of v.3. Judah had faced the current representative of a spirit of ruthless militarism and imperial aggrandizement. She was, of course, utterly powerless but had found that her God had placed his protecting wall around her (see esp. chs. 36 – 37). He had been her refuge ever since the exodus (Dt 33:27). Contrasting weather conditions provide further illustrations of God’s protecting care. Having used these analogies, Isaiah then justifies his use, in so doing demonstrating that metaphor has its roots in simile.

This prophet knows the power of words and the various ways one word is used may convey somewhat different ideas. He moves easily here from the figure of the shady place to the shadow cast by a cloud (v.5), both giving protection from the fierce summer heat, though in different ways.The raucous battlecries of the foreign armies become a triumph song when God intervenes on behalf of his people and all is changed.

6 – 8 Many point out the close connection between v.6 and 24:23 (we recall, of course, that chs. 24 – 27 constitute a special section, with its diverse parts all bound into one). As the Lord’s eschatological purposes unfold, he will reign in

glory on Mount Zion. The prophet has already pictured the Gentile nations as coming up to that mountain for worship (2:1 – 4); 25:6 now gives a view of the great feast God will prepare for them there. The image of the kingdom of God as a banquet is familiar to readers of the NT (Mt 22:1 – 14; Lk 14:15 – 24; Rev 19:6 – 10).

Kaiser (in loc.) points out many contrasts between the judgment of the earth in ch. 24 and this scene; for instance, God's judgment takes away the wine (24:9), but here it is restored in highest quality (25:6). All the adjectives and adjectival phrases in v.6 underline the superb quality of God's provision for the once rebellious nations. The Gentile prodigals find the fatted calf killed for them on their return to the Lord.

Verse 7 is understood in two different ways. It may refer to the blindness of the nations, which has caused them to worship false gods and not to acknowledge the Lord. The theme of light from God is important in Isaiah, and in ch. 60 he pictures a great light shining over God's people and all nations moving out of the darkness that covers them and into that light. Alternatively, he may have mourning veils or even a shroud of death (see NIV) in his mind. If so, vv.7 – 8 concern God's victory over death. Either interpretation seems possible, though the second is perhaps the more likely.

Many modern commentators are reluctant to ascribe belief in resurrection to Isaiah, often arguing for the opening clause of v.8 as a later addition and interpreting 26:19 as a figure for national renewal somewhat like the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Clements (in loc.), for example, declares, "The idea of the resurrection of the dead occurs in the Old Testament only as a very late idea (cf. Dan 12:2)." Yes, if evidence of earlier belief is removed or reinterpreted! This kind of argument is often circular. But if the rest of vv.6 – 8 is attributed to the prophet, there is no adequate reason — except for a particular theory of how biblical eschatology developed — to deny this clause to him, especially if 52:13 – 53:12 comes from him also (see the Introduction, pp. 438 – 48). Paul quoted 25:8a in 1 Corinthians 15:54 and applied it to the resurrection.

If God finally deals with death and thus with the tears it brings, and if vv.6 – 8 continue and develop the thought with which ch. 24 closes, the important issue of prophetic interpretation surfaces. The banishment of death belongs to the final

stage of God's great plan and is associated with the descent from heaven of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:1 – 4). This suggests that Mount Zion and Jerusalem in 24:23 are not geographical but symbols for the ultimate society. This raises acutely the question of the relationship between the millennium and the final state (see Introduction for extended comment on this). If v.7 is about the removal of spiritual blindness (as must surely be its meaning), it is unlikely that vv.6 – 7 (and so also 24:23) refer to the millennium with the prophecy moving on to the final state in v.8.

The "disgrace" of God's people (v.8b) is best understood in the light of the later prophecy in Ezekiel 5:13 – 17. Destined for salvation, they must first suffer judgment at his hands, although this disgrace will pass away when that ultimate day comes. God now stresses that these are his own promises, and so they cannot fail.

9 Once more we hear a song of praise (cf. 24:14 – 16; 25:1 – 5), wonderfully expressing that joy in God that comes when patient trust finds its reward in consummated salvation. Its ideas and language are thoroughly characteristic of Isaiah, and various parts of the verse are paralleled in many different parts of the book (e.g., 8:17; 12:1 – 6; 30:18; 33:22; 35:1 – 4, 10; 40:9; 49:25 – 26; 52:7 – 10; 60:16; 65:18).

10 – 12 The destinies of Jerusalem and of Moab are contrasted. The Moabite plateau can be clearly seen from Jerusalem, and Moab may well represent the surrounding pagan nations. If the Lord's purposes are to triumph so that all nations find reconciliation with him and each other at Mount Zion, their own pagan and aggressive purposes must be thwarted (see comment on vv.2 – 3).

In a powerful anthropomorphism, the prophet pictures the Lord's hand resting in blessing on Mount Zion and his feet trampling on Moab in judgment (v.10; cf. 40:11 – 12; 63:3). The similes used here are intentionally unpleasant to suggest that sin in its vileness reaps an appropriate harvest of judgment. Some modern commentators find the language unacceptable. Kaiser, for instance, calls it "despicable vulgarity," and many accuse the author of vindictive nationalism and hatred of a difficult neighboring nation. If, however, Isaiah is the author both of this passage and the oracle in chs. 15 – 16, we see that he is sensitive to the pain of Moab, even though he declares God's judgment against this nation.

Moab’s pride is symbolized by the high, fortified walls (v.12) that surrounded its cities, making the people think themselves impregnable.The fall of the cities despite their protective battlements — recalling the fall of Jericho that could have been seen from the slopes of the Moabite plateau — is just another reminder of the physical symbols of pride crowded together in 2:13 – 18, though obviously the ruin of the walls here is literal. It is also an example of the general judgment threatened on the strong fortified towns in v.2.

NOTES

2 Many commentators, perhaps correctly, assume that מֵעִיר (*mēʿîr*, lit., “from a city” or “no more a city”) in the first clause of the verse is textual corruption by dittography, since the form occurs again — and with greater apparent appropriateness — later in the verse.They therefore read עִיר (*ʿîr*,) instead.

4 The phrase “like a storm driving against a wall” suggests the ineffectiveness of the assault because the wall is God’s protection of his people.

7 לוֹט (*lôṭ*, lit., “covering”; GK 4287) is boldly translated “shroud” in the NIV. This is unfortunate, as it unnecessarily cuts the knot of a minor exegetical problem (see comment), which could have been left open by the more general word “covering” (cf. NASB).

8 Kissane (in loc.) is somewhat unusual in affirming that Isaiah is the author of this passage and yet denying that it teaches physical resurrection. He treats it (and also similar language in 26:19) as a figure for deliverance from the yoke of the oppressor.

11 אָרְבּוֹת (*ʾorbôt*, “cleverness”) is a *hapax legomenon*, though the root occurs elsewhere in the OT in the sense of “ambush.” G. R. Driver (“Isaiah 1 – 39: Linguistic and Textual Problems,” *JTS* 38 [1937]: 43) suggests a link with Arabic *ʾarbatun*(“skill”).The NIV seems to assume some such meaning, while the NASB opts for “trickery.”

C. Praise, Prayer, and Prophecy (26:1 – 21)

OVERVIEW

Mauchline (in loc.) is surely correct when he says of vv.1 – 19, “These verses are so closely knit together in idea and there is so clear a movement of thought that it seems necessary to regard them as a unity.” The movement of thought is beautiful. Isaiah begins with a song of praise sung by Judah of the future, with its theme being the trustworthiness of God, who protects the city of his oppressed people and destroys that of their oppressors (vv.1 – 6). Next, almost as in the book of Proverbs, he meditates on the ways of the righteous and of the wicked (vv.7 – 11). The Lord has blessed his people, even though they formerly acknowledged the lordship of other deities (vv.12 – 15). They had endured much but brought little blessing for the world, as they confess (vv.16 – 18); yet the God of grace promises them joyful resurrection to new life (v.19) after his wrath against sin has been revealed (vv.20 – 21).

1 In that day this song will be sung in the land of Judah:
We have a strong city;
God makes salvation
its walls and ramparts.
2 Open the gates
that the righteous nation may enter,
the nation that keeps faith.
3 You will keep in perfect peace
him whose mind is steadfast,
because he trusts in you.
4 Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal.
5 He humbles those who dwell on high,
he lays the lofty city low;
he levels it to the ground
and casts it down to the dust.
6 Feet trample it down —
the feet of the oppressed,
the footsteps of the poor.
7 The path of the righteous is level;
O upright One, you make the way of the righteous smooth.

8 Yes, LORD, walking in the way of your laws,
we wait for you;
your name and renown
are the desire of our hearts.
9 My soul yearns for you in the night;
in the morning my spirit longs for you.
When your judgments come upon the earth,
the people of the world learn righteous ness.
10 Though grace is shown to the wicked,
they do not learn righ teousness;
even in a land of uprightness they go on doing evil
and regard not the majesty of the LORD.
11 O LORD, your hand is lifted high,
but they do not see it.
Let them see your zeal for your people and be put to shame;
let the fi re reserved for your enemies consume them.
12 LORD, you establish peace for us;
all that we have accomplished you have done for us.
13 O LORD, our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us,
but your name alone do we honor.
14 They are now dead, they live no more;
those departed spirits do not rise.
You punished them and brought them to ruin;
you wiped out all memory of them.
15 You have enlarged the nation, O LORD;
you have enlarged the nation.
You have gained glory for yourself;
you have extended all the borders of the land.
16 LORD, they came to you in their distress;
when you disciplined them,
they could barely whisper a prayer.
17 As a woman with child and about to give birth
writhes and cries out in her pain,
so were we in your presence, O LORD.
18 We were with child, we writhed in pain,
but we gave birth to wind.
We have not brought salvation to the earth;
we have not given birth to people of the world.
19 But your dead will live;
their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
wake up and shout for joy.
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
the earth will give birth to her dead.
20 Go, my people, enter your rooms

and shut the doors behind you;
hide yourselves for a little while
until his wrath has passed by.
21 See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling
to punish the people of the earth for their sins.
The earth will disclose the blood shed upon her;
she will conceal her slain no longer.

COMMENTARY

1 – 6 The way chs. 24 – 27 are punctuated with songs of praise affects this whole section, for even threats of judgment are in the context of thanksgiving that God is bringing his purposes to fruition, so that human arrogance and tyranny will not prevail in the end. The two cities theme links this passage with chs. 24 – 25. In 25:4, God is himself his people's refuge, while here (v.1) he gives strength to the city by making salvation its walls and ramparts. We recall that Isaiah viewed such gifts of God as manifestations of what he is in himself (10:17 and comments there), and the personal reference returns in 26:4. God's visible gifts are distinguishable from himself, but not so those that are invisible and spiritual.

Every year Jerusalem was the pilgrimage goal for great crowds from all parts of the land (cf. Dt 16) as they made their way there for the great feasts. Many psalms, including the "Songs of Ascents" (Pss 120 – 34), were connected with these pilgrimages.In NT times pilgrims came from all over the Dispersion (cf. Ac 2:5 – 11). Isaiah may have had such a pilgrimage in mind here, or else he has a permanent settlement in view, with the city being part physical expression and part symbol for the whole people of God, "the righteous nation .. . that keeps faith" (v.2). The latter seems the more likely. Revelation 21:22 – 27 may owe something to this passage, though that passage goes beyond it in including the Gentiles (cf. Isa 2:1 – 4).

Verses 3 – 4 may be viewed as a beautiful individualization of what has already been conveyed in corporate terms in vv.1 – 2. The nation that keeps faith consists of individuals who trust in the Lord, for God's new-covenant purpose provides gracious personal knowledge of him for all included within it (Jer 31:31 – 34).The city gates admit the dispersed nation's returning members and its walls symbolize the divine protection; the Lord is himself the protecting Rock

in whom the believer may place trust. As there is a place of peace within the city for those who dwell in it with God (cf. Ps 46), so the Lord gives peace to any who repose confidence in him.

These verses also give two examples of emphasis by repetition. The word *šālôm* (“peace”) is repeated, conveying the perfection of this peace (“perfect peace” is lit. *šālôm šālôm*). “The LORD the LORD” in v.4 translate *Yah Yahweh*, the abbreviated and possibly more ancient form of the divine name (*Yah*) preceding its standard form (*Yahweh*).

Verses 5 – 6 again address God’s judgment on the worldly city (see comment on 24:10 – 13 and 25:1 – 5). Once again physical elevation suggests pride (cf. 2:12 – 18). An ancient city was often built on raised ground for maximum military advantage, so this ground then became the basis for walls, battlements, and other means of defense. Thus, verticality was part of the typical image of the city for most people. When God judges the city’s pride, he lays it low. In 25:10 the Lord’s feet trampled in judgment on Moab; here it is the people who have suffered oppression from Moab — presumably God’s people — who tread it under foot.This suggests they share in God’s victory (cf. Ps 110:2 – 3; 2Co 2:14).

7 – 11 In v.2 the prophet tells of the righteous nation and its proper home within the gates of the city of God. Here in v.7 he describes the way of the righteous, contrasting this with the outlook of the wicked in a fashion reminiscent of Psalm 1. The prophetic tradition in Israel was very old, and if the wisdom tradition went back at least to Solomon, we would expect some spiritual cross-fertilization. Prophetic inspiration did not bypass the whole culture in which the prophet lived, and there seems no reason why the Spirit of God should not have used the wisdom tradition in the interests of prophecy if both were inspired. In some ways we might compare this with the way NT writers used the OT, given by the same Spirit of inspiration but in another age.

The thought of v.7 is also in Psalm 27:11, but here with a profound addition.The God of the righteous is himself righteous, and he is described here as *yāšār* (“upright”; GK 3838). This is the only OT passage where this term is a divine title, though it is used elsewhere of God’s word (Ps 33:4 [NASB]), his judgments (Ps 119:137 [NASB]), and his ways (Dt 32:4). There are also references to the book of Jashar (*yāšār*m, the word is the same in Hebrew) in

Joshua 10:13 and 2 Sam uel 1:18. This, the Book of the Upright, could have taken its title from God, the “upright One,” the Source of all righ teous-ness. The moral concept of righteous ness is often expressed by words originally conveying physical uprightness or straightness, and not only in the Bible.The words also seem to suggest appropriateness of destiny. He who is straight or “on the level” has his path smoothed before him by the God who is upright.

Mišpāṭ(GK 5477) almost certainly means “law” rather than “judgment” in v.8 (cf. NIV mg.), as this fits the context much better. Just as the NT believer looks forward “to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteous ness” (2Pe 3:13), so the OT saint, represented here by Isaiah, longs for the day when God’s name will be fittingly honored. The words “we wait for you” reflect his conviction that such a day will come — and by the activity of God himself. This passionate desire is not just a longing for a better order, a kind of moral utopia, for the whole expectation is personal. It is God for whom the prophet longs (cf. Pss 42:1 – 4; 63:1; 84:2), and this longing possesses him night and day. In a similar way, Chris tian people have yearned for the second advent of Christ.

We earlier alluded to the charge of some scholars that the prophets were Pelagians before Pelagius (see comment on 1:16 – 17), a teacher who saw God’s grace simply as an aid to self-reformation. Verses 9b – 10 are much more in line with Augustine’s emphasis on the radical nature of both sin and grace. Sin blinds the sinner’s mind so that he sees nothing from a divine perspective, least of all his own sin. It is a function of judgment to teach the seriousness of sin and to show that God cares deeply about righteousness. Acts 5:1 – 14 illustrates this principle. In this respect, the prophet assures us, judgment teaches more effectively than grace.

We should not read into this latter term all it means in the NT, for if we did Isaiah’s statement would be patently untrue; rather, what he says emphasizes that the wicked may receive undeservedly many blessings from God’s hand, yet show no more regard for the righteous ness that so greatly concerns him. In addition, even where general moral conditions favor righteous ness (viz., in a time of spiritual revival), the wicked determinedly go their own way. Even now (v.11) God’s hand is uplifted, ready to strike them in judgment; but they are unaware of it. The prophet identifies himself completely, as God’s people do in Revelation 19:1 – 5, with God’s judgment on the wicked. We must compassionately seek to bring the gospel to others, but on the day of judgment

we must accept his verdict; for as the Judge of all the earth, he does only what is right.

12 – 15 From time to time Isaiah's oneness with his older contemporaries on various prophetic themes is apparent in his work.This passage is reminiscent of Hosea 14. In Isaiah 26:11, in the context of God's judgment on his enemies, Isaiah speaks about God's "zeal for [his] people." It is as though he has suddenly realized the contrast between God's dealing with Israel and the nations and is moved to confess the great unworthiness of those whom God blesses so richly.Verse 12a suggests it was written after the singular divine protection of Jerusalem in 701 BC. Verse 12b is a profound truth blessedly destructive of spiritual pride. It almost fits right into the Pauline letters (cf. Php 2:12 – 13).

The reiterated name "LORD" in vv.11 – 13 (Heb. *Yahweh*), each time taking the primary position in the Hebrew sentence, conveys its own message. It is the God of Israel's distinctive name setting him apart from every false god. This sets the literary scene for the statements of v.13. Obviously this verse does not mean the "other lords" have real existence as deities but simply that they were believed truly to exist, their rule sinfully acknowledged by the people in past times. A brief survey of the books of Judges and Kings, for instance, illustrates this frequently. Most commentators, however, see the "other lords" as the various nations who ruled over God's people. Certainly v.14 must refer to human beings. Perhaps both false deities and the foreign rulers who regarded themselves as their representatives are in view, the first emphasized in v.13 and the second in v.14.

The rise and fall of nations and great empires is a fact of history, and Isaiah sees it as a result of God's activity in humanity's story (cf. 40:23 – 24). He has already vividly pictured the descent of Babylon's king into the world of departed spirits in 14:12 – 21; now he makes it clear that this is the way that all of Israel's past oppressors have gone.Young (in loc.) warns against misinterpreting v.14:

> It is a mistake to use this verse to support the position that no general resurrection of the dead is taught here, but only a resurrection of the just. What Isaiah is speaking of is not so much a resurrection, as the fact that those who had once acted as lords over Israel are now dead, and cannot return to life again to afflict the Israelites. He is not denying that in the general resurrection they too shall arise unto everlasting punishment. On that particular subject he is not now speaking. What he is saying, however, is of comfort to the Israelites, for it teaches them that in the kingdom founded on Zion, they shall be free from those who formerly had oppressed them.

In a later passage (54:1 – 3), Isaiah foretells the nation's expansion, which was also promised in 9:3, in a context where the coming of the messianic child is proclaimed. So we should treat v.15 as predictive, the "prophetic perfects" here expressing the prophet's certainty that what God has promised is as sure as though it had already taken place. Isaiah 9:7 contains the intriguing, somewhat enigmatic promise, "of the *increase* of his government and peace there will be no end" (emphasis mine). The land promised to Israel in Exodus 23:31 was never fully occupied, even in the days of David and Solomon, but the messianic kingdom is to be wider still (cf. Ps 72:8). All this will bring glory to God because it is his act, not theirs (cf. v.12), and because it will show forth his glory in areas where paganism formerly held sway.

16 – 18 From the vantage point of the eschatological pinnacle to which the Spirit of God has transported him, the prophet looks back over earlier days — days that to him, as a man of history, were still in the future.The people will come to the Lord in distress but with great earnestness (v.16). Motyer (1999, in loc.) comments that the book of Judges is a good commentary on this. The words "they could barely whisper a prayer" may be more literally rendered,"they poured out a whisper." The verb pertains to the heart, the noun to the lips. Hannah prayed with exceptional earnestness (1Sa 1:12 – 16), but she was inaudible to Eli. Fervor and noise are not necessarily spiritual companions. The phrase, "when you discipline them," suggests the prayer is motivated not only by distress because of foreign oppression but also by sorrow for sin. Perhaps the national conversion of Romans 11:23 – 32 is in view.

The experience of childbirth provides a forceful analogy (v.17). The nation, following her ancestor Jacob, has attempted self-salvation, but God alone can bring his purposes for her to birth. Israel is like a woman with labor pains, yet unlike her has not given birth (v.18). All the suffering has been in vain. It is, in fact, to be only through the Servant of the Lord (52:13 – 53:12) that salvation will be brought to the earth.

The NIV's "we have not given birth to people of the world" appropriately continues the analogy and also provides a striking parallel to the penultimate clause. Birth into God's kingdom for the nations (Ps 87:4 – 7) is God's work alone through his Messiah-Servant — and beyond the capacity of Israel herself.

Only through him who is the true seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16, 28 – 29) can and will the nations become his children, thus inheriting the promise made to him (Ge 12:1 – 3, et al.). For an alternative interpretation of v.18, see the Notes.

19 In its context this verse is striking. It presents a glorious contrast for Israel not only with the dead and impotent tyrants of her past (v.14) but also with her own strenuous yet ineffective endeavors to bring forth spiritual fruit (vv.17 – 18). Being reluctant to attribute to Isaiah a belief in physical resurrection (see comment on 25:8), many modern scholars either deny him this verse, placing it much later, or interpret it figuratively. Yet if Ezekiel 37 uses the concept of resurrection figuratively, surely that concept would be well known in literal terms! Why should this not have come about through Isaiah?

Is this verse to be understood spiritually, of a nation's rebirth to a new spiritual life, or literally? Skinner (in loc.) calls it "a clear intimation of a belief in the resurrection." Young (in loc.) says, "The language is not to be taken figuratively." Certainly Isaiah's book is replete with forceful, graphic imagery, but everything here leads the mind toward a literal interpretation. Certainly it is not devoid of metaphor, for the prophet calls the dead to "wake up" and asserts that the earth will "give birth" to her dead. The metaphorical, however, must always rest on the literal; and it is with the literal that this verse commences: "But your dead will live; their bodies will rise." This verse prepares the way for Daniel 12:2, which fills out more fully the destinies of the righteous and the wicked beyond death and subsequent resurrection.

20 – 21 Verse 20 perhaps anticipates the joyous declaration with which ch. 40 so memorably begins. A time will come when God's wrath has passed. Here the wrath may be with Israel herself (cf. 40:2), and during the exile the people are to encourage themselves in the assurance that this judgment will end in God's good time. Alternatively, it may be expressed in God's punishment of the nations, which v.21 relates to.This is more likely because of the apparent allusion to the Passover in v.20. Just as Israel's people found refuge within the blood-sprinkled doors of their homes (Ex 12) until God's wrath against Egypt spent itself, so Israel is to hide for a while, perhaps in Babylonian exile. Shutting the doors suggests both safety from danger and separation from the surrounding pagans, who are under judgment. Israel in exile was called to be a holy people, distinct from her neighbors.

While the people are hidden away in their places, God comes forth from his place for a punitive purpose.Verse 21 is a reminder of the general context and of the cosmic judgment described in ch. 24. It also recalls v.19.The earth is not only the burial place of many who will desert her at the resurrection; she has also admitted the blood and bodies of many whose deaths were due to the sins of others, the acts of violent men. Places where great human tragedies and horrifying sins have taken place may disclose no evidence to the casual passerby, but on the day of the Lord's judgment that evidence will confront the terrified eyes of the perpetrators. Such secrets belong to time, not to eternity.

NOTES

3 Clements (in loc.) points out that יֵצֶר (*yēṣer,*, "mind"; GK 3671) was widely used in the rabbinic writings to express the whole attitude and direction of one's life.

7 מֵישָׁר (*mêšār,* GK 4793/4797) may bear the sense "level" (NIV) but is more often used figuratively of moral straightness or happiness. The root appears in the literal physical sense, however, in 40:4 and 42:16 and elsewhere outside Isaiah. Possibly it was deliberately used because of its double meaning.

16 לַחַשׁ (*laḥaš*), though often used of magic spells, properly signifies "whisper," which seems to be the meaning here.

18 יִפְלוּ (*yipʿlû*), translated "fallen" in the last clause of the RSV, is rendered "given birth" in the NIV. This latter sense does not occur elsewhere in the OT but is one sense of the cognate Arabic root. The RSV, following the verb's normal sense, may be correct, in which case Israel here is God's instrument of judgment, deemed ineffective, on the inhabitants of the world. But it seems better to follow the NIV, which integrates the language with the rest of vv.17 – 18.

19 The MT and 1QIsa both read נִבְלָתִי יְקוּמוּן (*nᵉbēlātî yᵉqûmûn*), which is rendered "their bodies will rise," but which actually features the peculiar phenomenon of a singular noun (lit., "my body") with a plural verb (lit., "they will arise"). It

seems that the noun views the nation as a collective entity, while the verb individualizes it.This suggests that the simple renewal of the nation does not do justice to what the prophet has in mind. It is the resurrection of the nation, but in terms of new life for its individuals.The reference to the dew suggests the refreshing of the ground so that plants may grow in it — an appropriate image for the new life to be given to the bodily “seed” committed to it.

D. The Restoration of Israel (27:1 – 13)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah 24 – 27, the eschatological-apocalyptic section, concerns God's final purposes in the world. The prophecies recorded here concern the whole world but also relate to Israel and her place in God's universal purposes. Earlier in these chapters (esp. ch. 24), the emphasis was on the nations as a whole; but reference to Israel increases as the chapters proceed, with ch. 26 almost dominated by her. But that chapter ends with a reference to the judgment of the nations, and in ch. 27 we are once again reminded of the international context of God's dealings with his people.

1 In that day,
the LORD will punish with his sword,
his fierce, great and powerful sword,
Leviathan the gliding serpent,
Leviathan the coiling serpent;
he will slay the monster of the sea.
2 In that day —
"Sing about a fruitful vineyard:
3 I, the LORD, watch over it;
I water it continually.
I guard it day and night
so that no one may harm it.
4 I am not angry.
If only there were briers and thorns confronting me!
I would march against them in battle;
I would set them all on fire.
5 Or else let them come to me for refuge;
let them make peace with me,
yes, let them make peace with me."
6 In days to come Jacob will take root,
Israel will bud and blossom
and fill all the world with fruit.
7 Has the LORD struck
her as he struck down those who struck her?
Has she been killed
as those were killed who killed her?

8 By warfare and exile you contend with her —
with his fierce blast he drives her out,
as on a day the east wind blows.
9 By this, then, will Jacob's guilt be atoned for,
and this will be the full fruitage of the removal of his sin:
When he makes all the altar stones
to be like chalk stones crushed to pieces,
no Asherah poles or incense altars
will be left standing.
10 The fortifi ed city stands desolate,
an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert;
there the calves graze,
there they lie down;
they strip its branches bare.
11 When its twigs are dry, they are broken off
and women come and make fires with them.
For this is a people without understanding;
so their Maker has no compassion on them,
and their Creator shows them no favor.
12 In that day the LORD will thresh from the fl owing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one. 13 And in that day a great trumpet will sound. Those who were perishing in Assyria and those who were exiled in Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain in Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

1This fascinating verse graphically pictures God the great warrior going into battle against fearsome and monstrous enemies and utterly defeating them. The language draws on mythology (see Note), but this need cause us no serious problems. Writers, whether of Scripture or otherwise, use illustrative material from a wide variety of sources: nature, history, mythology, and literature. The use of mythology here simply shows Isaiah and his readers know the mythological stories, not that they believe them. If a modern historian called a fierce, aggressive nation a great dragon, would his readers assume he believed in the existence of such creatures? Surely not! Kidner (in loc.) has well said that "this Canaanite material is reshaped to the divine truth it now conveys — truth which demolishes its pagan structure."

We could comment on every word of this verse. The succession of adjectives describing the sword of the Lord stresses the weapon's fearsomeness, emphasizing the effectiveness of judgment. "His fierce, great and powerful

sword” is probably in apposition to “his sword,” just as “Leviathan the coiling serpent” is in apposition to “Leviathan the gliding serpent.” If so, the prophet has only two enemies in mind, not three. If the reference is to human enemies, “Leviathan” is probably the evil power centered in the Tigris-Euphrates basin, the two Mesopotamian enemies being different manifestations of it.The monster of the sea then becomes Egypt. Others think all three phrases designate Egypt or perhaps one or more other nations.

Another possibility is that the reference is to supernatural foes, and most modern commentators now hold this view. The verse is too enigmatic for us to be certain, but Blenkinsopp (in loc.) has an apt comment: “There can be little doubt that, in the context of 13 – 27 as a whole, a *political* connotation is present and intended, but the introduction at this point of the ancient motif of the cosmic conflict and victory of the creator-deity suggests that the scribe had in mind the final overcoming of evil as a metahistorical and metaphysical force.” In any case, this statement must have come with real power to assure God’s people that every great enemy will be destroyed.

2 – 6 One of the most memorable passages in Isaiah occurred in 5:1 – 7. Isaiah’s parable of the vineyard there united beauty of language and solemnity of theme. Moreover, his use of the vineyard for Israel established it as a symbol. The context here simply confirms this. In this way, words and phrases — and the images they convey — come to have technical force so that eventually exceptions to the technical use become rare and even need to be demonstrated.

The repeated phrase “in that day” in vv.1 – 2 suggests that the judgment of Israel’s enemies and her own blessing belong to the same general eschatological era. In ch. 5, the vineyard is barren and unproductive, itself threatened with judgment. In the eschatological picture here, however, the vineyard is fruitful. The parable began as such a happy song there to lull the hearers into a complacent mood and so take them unawares with the message of judgment. Here the opening mood is similar, and even its thought follows a somewhat similar pattern. The reader, familiar now with the twist in the tale of the earlier parable, expects to find it repeated but once again is taken by surprise, for now the opening atmosphere is sustained throughout.

“A fruitful vineyard” (v.2) is literally “a vineyard of wine.” This suggests both

comparison and contrast with ch. 5. It compares with the reader's expectation there but contrasts with the prophet's ultimate description. In v.3 the thought of 5:2 is carried through but expressed differently. There is, if anything, even more emphasis on the Lord's loving concern for this vineyard, and it is made clear that never for one moment does he forget its needs or relax his vigilance, lest it should become a prey to its enemies.The constant watering (v.3) reminds us of Jeremiah's oft-repeated assertion that the Lord repeatedly sent his servants the prophets to speak to his people. The vivid literalism of the KJV's "daily rising up early and sending them" (Jer 7:25; 25:4; et al.) has been lost in most modern English versions, including the NIV.

To understand the wonderful statement that opens v.4, we need to see it in the light of the phrase "in that day," with which the new parable of the vineyard commences.The prophet is not describing the Israel of his day but the Israel that is to be when God's wrath is past (cf. 40:2).

The hearer or reader, however, with the earlier parable in mind, may well be asking, "But what about the briers and thorns?" In ch. 5 these were part of the judgment of God on the vineyard and also the final evidence of its lack of real fruit. Here God pledges himself to destroy them should any such again threaten his vineyard. Indeed, he appears eager to do this, perhaps to show his covenantal faithfulness to his people and his determination to do them every possible good. In 10:33 – 34 God goes into battle against great trees, lopping the boughs from them with his ax; here the undergrowth feels the shriveling heat of his anger. The briers and thorns are not explicitly interpreted but may represent internal rather than external enemies, paganizers rather than pagans.

Verse 5 is a neglected OT promise — or rather an implied promise — of forgiveness to the penitent. In v.4 the God of battles marches against the briers and thorns, carrying a flaming torch and about to set fire to this rank undergrowth; but before doing so, he proclaims the alternative of peace. His action against the briers and thorns is to protect his people, but in v.5 the very enemies are offered refuge (cf. 25:4) if they will accept his terms of peace. This offer is made most emphatically, with the clause repeated in the Hebrew but with the words in a different order. This serves the purpose of directing the hearer's attention to the words themselves and so to their meaning and the offer of mercy they contain.

Verse 6 brings the parable to a beautiful climax. It is noteworthy that the prophet speaks not of Judah but of “Jacob . . . Israel” here, for he has the whole people in view. Widyapranawa (in loc.) commenting on “Jacob” and on the story of the renaming of Jacob as “Israel,” says, “Israel was . . .that people who had first resisted grace, had then struggled to obtain God’s blessing, and had finally received it” (cf. also the reference to Jacob in v.9).The figure of the vineyard now disappears; instead Israel is presented as a plant. Perhaps the vineyard figure contemplates Israel in the land, while the vine lays more stress on the people themselves, although, of course, it is in the land that Israel has taken root.

At first the picture is perfectly normal. The root, bud, and blossom depict strong and healthy growth, everything happening in its season. The unexpected comes at the end as this vine becomes extraordinarily extensive (cf. 16:8), filling the whole world with its fruit. Perhaps this alludes to the fruitfulness and extensive influence of Joseph promised in Genesis 49:22. We can certainly see a spiritual fulfillment of this in the gospel’s progress throughout the world, for the Messiah is himself the true vine (Jn 15:1 – 8), his disciples the fruit-bearing branches. In this way God’s purpose for Israel is expressed in the supreme Israelite and those who are joined by faith to him. Does this exhaust the fulfillment intended by God? See the Introduction, pp. 450 – 52, for comment on the interpretation of such passages.

7 – 11 This passage has been much discussed.Duhm (in loc.) argues for its application to the northern kingdom, and many commentators agree.Although some of the arguments used to support this view are rationalistic, a case can certainly be made for it without resorting to them. The word “Jacob” is used both within this immediate passage (v.9) and in its context (v.6), perhaps suggesting that Israel rather than Judah is in mind. The fortified city of v.10 could certainly be Samaria, and the exile of v.8 would then follow its fall.A reference to Judah is not, of course, impossible, especially if we treat the passage as predictive and the past tenses as prophetic perfects. In this case the city would be Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon.

A third possibility, however, suggests itself. Since so many of the references to cities in chs. 24 – 27 seem general, not specific (see the comment at 24:10 – 13 and the Overview to ch. 25), perhaps the reference to Israel (i.e., Jacob) designates not Israel apart from Judah (i.e., the northern kingdom) but of Israel including Judah. The whole people and their judgment are in view. The fortified

city stands for each stronghold overcome by the Mesopotamian enemies, and the exile is the common experience of the whole people. We might expect a section of the book whose general subject is so comprehensive (see esp. ch. 24) to treat the chosen nation as a whole in its concluding chapter. This is the standpoint from which we will view these verses.

The subject of v.7, though unexpressed in the Hebrew, is clearly "the LORD ." The questions are like those of the imaginary Jewish objector who challenges Paul's thesis in Romans (e.g., Ro 3:1).There is no doubt that the new parable of the vineyard in vv.2 – 6 does not tell the whole story of Israel's relationship with God, for he has taken punitive action against his own people, not only against their adversaries. The prophet brings the two together (e.g., in 10:5 – 19). Despite the indisputable fact that God often beat his people severely (e.g., 1:4 – 9), the implied answer to the question in this verse is "no." God does make a distinction between his own people and their oppressors. All the chastisement is for a good end, to bring them to repentance (v.9).

By common consent v.8 is difficult. Young (in loc.) gives a helpful comment and translation:

> In this verse and in the ninth Isaiah's purpose is to emphasize with respect to Israel certain points that are necessary for the understanding of the whole picture, namely, that where a terrible burden of judgment has fallen upon the whole earth, Judah suffers but mildly. We would therefore translate, *In measure, in the sending her away, thou dost contend with her. By this hard wind he removes her in the day of the east wind.* The thought may then be paraphrased as follows: "By sending Judah away into exile in moderation, thou art trying to contend or reason with her. In a day when the east wind blows, thou dost remove Judah by thine own hard wind." (emphasis his)

Except that we will see the passage as applying to the whole of Israel, not just Judah, we will follow this interpretation and give the grounds for it in the Notes.

Characteristically, Isaiah calls judgment a fierce wind (cf. comment on 4:4; see also 41:16).The scorching east wind, driving the hot desert sand before it, was much dreaded (Ge 41:6; Job 27:21 – 22; Jer 18:17; et al.). Both the Assyrian and Babylonian enemies came from the east and moved captives from Israel and Judah there for exile. In fact, exile, unlike destruction, is punishment tempered by mercy, for there is still life and therefore still hope.

It may seem strange that v.9 applies atonement language to the penitence induced by exile rather than to sacrifice. Could Israel perhaps deal with her own sins? If so, why the need for the great self-offering of the Lord's Servant in 52:13 – 53:12? This verse and that great passage seem to teach different theologies. The doctrinal conflict is, however, more apparent than real. Through exile the nation will come to a penitent awareness of its guilt. The actual objective basis of its reconciliation with God is not so much in view as its practical cause. The people were removed so that their sins might be removed.

This way of taking the statement becomes clear when we read the whole verse, for it is all about a new attitude to God's will, the product of a penitent heart. Isaiah is in line here with Jeremiah 31:31 – 34 and Ezekiel 36:24 – 31. In accordance with Isaiah's great fondness for analogies, the language of objective atonement is applied figuratively to penitent turning to God. Israel's penitence will show itself especially in the destruction of pagan altars and symbols (see comment on 17:8 for a detailed interpretation of the various terms used here).

When Israel was preparing to enter Canaan, God commanded her to destroy everything pagan (Ex 34:13; Dt 12:2 – 3). When God has purified Israel through banishment and exile, she will return much chastened to carry out this commandment, which she had failed to do thoroughly enough when she began her sojourn in the land. It is not, in fact, pagan altars and Asherah poles that lie in ruins in the land at this time. Rather, in northern Israel, the Assyrians have devastated Samaria and other cities, and they have also desolated many cities of Judah (1:7). Jerusalem, too, will eventually go the same way, through the Babylonians.

Isaiah often represents the effects of judgment through war as the virtual reversal of civilization (e.g., 3:4 – 6; 5:17; 7:23 – 25), and this language is literal, not figurative. When a city is reduced to rubble, the domestic animals, normally pastured outside it, are free to cross its broken walls and roam in it (v.10). Soon vegetation emerges through cracks in the streets and between the fallen stones. The ghost town will eventually have trees growing in it, and these will feed animals with their bark and supply firewood for the women of the surrounding villages (v.11).We recall that the stones of the cities of once-mighty Rome were used as building materials by the barbarians who took over its territory.

In some respects, as already suggested, Isaiah stands in the wisdom as well as in the prophetic tradition (see the comments at 25:7 – 11). His prophecies place emphasis from time to time on the importance of wisdom and discernment and the seriousness of inner blindness. It is this culpable blindness that has caused Israel's exile. The descriptions of God here remind us of later chapters (e.g., 43:1; 44:2). The statement that God does not show compassion or favor to them is not, of course, absolute. It is perhaps a partial "yes!" answer to the questions of v.7, the main answer to which is "no!" When the appointed time of their judgment finally came, God did not show compassion, but later he would and did.

12 – 13 These verses are of unusual interest. They bring the great eschatological-apocalyptic section of the book to a wonderful conclusion, but we should notice that the two verses do not teach the same truth.They are complementary, not repetitive. Verse 12 is the more unusual of the two. Here the prophet refers to the traditional boundaries of the Promised Land (cf. comment at 26:15). God will treat this whole large area as one huge grainfield. Never throughout its history did a pure Israel exist. There were always foreign and unbelieving elements in it, the two not always coinciding. God's judgment will therefore begin at the land of his own people.If his threshing floor yields much grain, there will be chaff too. The nation is to be purified, as Ezekiel later promises (Eze 36:24 – 32), though he speaks of a regathering of the people from alien lands.To this Isaiah now moves.

The figure of the threshing floor is replaced by that of a trumpet (v.13). Beyond the Euphrates is the land of the Assyrians, and beyond the Wadi of Egypt lies Egypt. In 2:1 – 4 and in 60:1 – 14 Isaiah describes Jerusalem as the focal point to which the penitent Gentiles will come, both to hear God's word and to worship him. But not even Israel is there yet, and the prophet declares that the traditional lands of her captivity must yield up her lost and scattered ones so that they may join the worshiping throng at Zion's temple. Like v.6, this can be interpreted at different levels (see Introduction, pp. 451 – 52).

NOTES

1 לִוְיָתָן (*liwyātān*, "Leviathan") appears in several OT passages (Job 3:8; Pss

74:14; 104:26), where clearly a great sea creature is being described. Most scholars consider the creature described under that name in Job 41:1 – 11[40:25 – 41:3] to be the crocodile.The implication of a plurality of heads in Psalm 74:14, however, certainly suggests a mythical creature; and the term as used here is normally linked with the Ugaritic Lotan, the chaos monster destroyed by Baal in the Canaanite creation myth. This verse in Isaiah in fact directly quotes from the story of Baal found in the Ugaritic documents (*KTU* 5.1.1 and *KTU* 5.1.28).

As indicated in the commentary, the use of such phraseology does not imply acceptance of Canaanite mythology but simply the knowledge of it, so that the term may be applied figuratively to monstrous enemies (either human or superhuman) of Israel and of God (see *ZPEB* 3:912; 4:33 – 43; Blenkinsopp and Wildberger, in loc.; the balanced note in Young, in loc.). For the monster of the sea, see the references to Rahab in 30:7 and 51:9 (esp. the comment on 30:7). It may have been seen to be particularly appropriate for Egypt because of the watery associations of the Nile Delta and Egypt's defeat by the Lord at the Red Sea.

2 The words "a fruitful vineyard" are a free translation of כֶּרֶם חֶמֶר (*kerem ḥemer*, lit., "a vineyard of wine").This is the reading of *BHS* (footnote) and lQIsa, though many commentators favor emending it to כֶּרֶם חֶמֶד (*kerem ḥemed*, "a pleasant vineyard"), read by *BHS*, LXX, et al. Either fits the context.

8 The commentary adopts the translation and interpretation of Young (in loc.) for this verse. The Hebrew opens with בְּסַאסְּאָהּ (*bᵉsaʾssᵉʾâ*), a *hapax legomenon* , though the first consonant is probably the common particle בְּ (*bᵉ*,"in"),"in"). The word is usually taken to be a contraction of סְעָה סְעָה (*sᵉʿâ sᵉʿâ*," , "measure for measure" or "moderately"). Most ancient versions assume something like this. The NIV's "by warfare" follows the LXX.The phrase Young translates as "by sending her away" has a feminine suffix, rather unexpectedly. Comparing the use of the same verb שָׁלַח (*šālaḥ*., "to send away") in 50:1, he suggests that this conveys a picture of divorce, possibly suggested also in the NASB.Young thinks, therefore, that it may not refer to the exile but to the setting aside of the theocracy for a while. It could surely suggest exile, however; for if the land Israel occupies is peculiarly the Lord's, then the wife is being banished from the marital home.

12 The Hebrew lacks the word “Euphrates,” but “the River” in the OT is always the Euphrates unless the context indicates otherwise (cf. Jos 24:15; Isa 8:7). “The Wadi of Egypt” is the <El <Arish, the border between Israel and Egypt (cf. Ge 15:18; 1Ki 8:65; Eze 47:15 – 19).

IV. God and His People (28:1 – 33:24)

OVERVIEW

Isaiah is comparatively simple to analyze into its main divisions, for it has a most beautiful order (see Introduction, pp. 459 – 62). There is less agreement, however, about these six chapters than about the other sections. Most writers who recognize an overall pattern in the book take chs. 28 – 32 to be a unity, despite their elements of diversity. Others add ch. 33, while still others also add chs. 34 – 35. Certainly chs. 34 – 35 form a fitting climax to what has gone before; but just as we treated chs. 24 – 27 (climaxing chs. 13 – 23) as a sufficiently distinct unit to justify a separate section in our analysis, so we will do with chs. 34 – 35.

In Psalm 103, the psalmist begins with God’s blessings shown to him personally, moves out to the blessing of his nation, and ends with the praises of the whole cosmos. There is something like this pattern in the chapters of Isaiah we have surveyed so far. Judah and Jerusalem are the focus of interest in the first twelve chapters, and they are followed by a survey of the nations that formed Judah’s political and religious environment. Finally, in chs. 24 – 27, the prophet’s visions encompassed the whole universe, while never neglecting his own people’s destiny. Here we return to “square one”: Jerusalem herself — the empirical Jerusalem, that is — is at the center of the picture.That picture will undoubtedly come to include wider elements, but its center is Zion right to the end (see 33:24 and 35:10).

When Isaiah was divided into chapters, it was noted that in this part of it the Hebrew word *hôy* (“woe”) occurred several times, and this was adopted as the clue to the appropriate division of chs. 28 – 33. This was carried through

consistently, except for the division between chs. 31 and 32. We will ourselves, in general, follow this same pattern. The material in these chapters seems to belong to Hezekiah’s reign.

We should seek to read biblical passages with sensitivity to their emotional as well as their intellectual content. In writing on these chapters, Oswalt comments helpfully on the prophet’s scorn and Widyapranawa on his use of irony.

A. Woe to Samaria (28:1 – 29)

OVERVIEW

Does our assertion above that Jerusalem is central to chs. 28 – 35 require some modification here? No, for Isaiah's prophecies about Ephraim are not simply for the sake of its people but also — and perhaps even more — to point out some salutary lessons to Jerusalem and her rulers (cf. 28:14 – 15). The English stylist G. A. Smith (*The Book of Isaiah*, 2 vols [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1927], in loc.), who was sensitive to Isaiah's literary qualities but denied its integrity, wrote about this chapter:

> This is clearly one of the greatest of Isaiah's prophecies. It is distinguished by that regal versatility of style, which places its author at the head of the Hebrew writers. Keen analyses of character, realistic contrasts between sin and judgment, clever retorts and epigrams, rapids of scorn, and a spate of judgment, but for final issue a placid stream of argument banked by sweet parable — such are the literary forms of this chapter.

The original recipients of these oracles, though perhaps not conscious of an outstanding aesthetic experience, would have been gripped by their spiritual content. Nevertheless, the one was the vehicle for the other. Great preaching in every age uses forceful logic and vivid imagery to convey spiritual challenge, as Isaiah does outstandingly here.

1 Woe to that wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards,
    to the fading flower, his glorious beauty,
set on the head of a fertile valley —
    to that city, the pride of those laid low by wine!
2 See, the Lord has one who is powerful and strong.
    Like a hailstorm and a destructive wind,
like a driving rain and a flooding downpour,
    he will throw it forcefully to the ground.
3 That wreath, the pride of Ephraim's drunkards,
    will be trampled underfoot.
4 That fading flower, his glorious beauty,
    set on the head of a fertile valley,
will be like a fig ripe before harvest —

as soon as someone sees it and takes it in his hand,
he swallows it.

5 In that day the LORD Almighty
will be a glorious crown,
a beautiful wreath
for the remnant of his people.

6 He will be a spirit of justice
to him who sits in judgment,
a source of strength
to those who turn back the battle at the gate.

7 And these also stagger from wine
and reel from beer:
Priests and prophets stagger from beer
and are befuddled with wine;
they reel from beer,
they stagger when seeing visions,
they stumble when rendering decisions.

8 All the tables are covered with vomit
and there is not a spot without filth.

9 "Who is it he is trying to teach?
To whom is he explaining his message?
To children weaned from their milk,
to those just taken from the breast?

10 For it is:
Do and do, do and do,
rule on rule, rule on rule;
a little here, a little there."

11 Very well then, with foreign lips and strange tongues
God will speak to this people,

12 to whom he said,
"This is the resting place, let the weary rest";
and, "This is the place of repose"
—but they would not listen.

13 So then, the word of the LORD to them will become:
Do and do, do and do,
rule on rule, rule on rule;
a little here, a little there —
so that they will go and fall backward,
be injured and snared and captured.

14 Therefore hear the word of the LORD, you scoffers
who rule this people in Jerusalem.

15 You boast, "We have entered into a covenant with death,
with the grave we have made an agreement.
When an overwhelming scourge sweeps by,
it cannot touch us,
for we have made a lie our refuge

and falsehood our hiding place.2”
16 So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
“See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.
17 I will make justice the measuring line
and righ teousness the plumb line;
hail will sweep away your refuge, the lie,
and water will overflow your hiding place.
18 Your covenant with death will be annulled;
your agreement with the grave will not stand.
When the overwhelming scourge sweeps by,
you will be beaten down by it.
19 As often as it comes it will carry you away;
morning after morning, by day and by night,
it will sweep through.”
The understanding of this message
will bring sheer terror.
20 The bed is too short to stretch out on,
the blanket too narrow to wrap around you.
21 The LORD will rise up as he did at Mount Perazim,
he will rouse himself as in the Valley of Gibeon —
to do his work, his strange work,
and perform his task, his alien task.
22 Now stop your mocking,
or your chains will become heavier;
the Lord, the LORD Almighty, has told me
of the destruction decreed against the whole land.
23 Listen and hear my voice;
pay attention and hear what I say.
24 When a farmer plows for planting, does he plow continually?
Does he keep on breaking up and harrowing the soil?
25 When he has leveled the surface,
does he not sow caraway and scatter cummin?
Does he not plant wheat in its place,
barley in its plot,
and spelt in its field?
26 His God instructs him
and teaches him the right way.
27 Caraway is not threshed with a sledge,
nor is a cartwheel rolled over cummin;
caraway is beaten out with a rod,
and cummin with a stick.
28 Grain must be ground to make bread;
so one does not go on threshing it forever.

Though he drives the wheels of his threshing cart over it,
his horses do not grind it.

29 All this also comes from the LORD Almighty,
wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 Verse 1 is not easy to translate clearly into English. Literally it is, “Woe to the coronet of pride of the drunkards of Ephraim and to the fading flower of its glorious beauty that is on the head of the fat valley of those who are stunned with wine!” The NIV gives the sense effectively. Apparently Isaiah has a vision of the alleged spiritual leaders of Ephraim, the northern kingdom (cf. v.7), staggering in their inebriation and wearing some kind of floral wreath on their heads, probably tilted at a jaunty angle. This suggests to him another crowned head, that of the hill on which their capital city, Samaria, is situated. This hill stands in a commanding position at the head of a fertile valley. Amos also castigated Samaria for its drunken decadence (Am 4:1; 6:1, 6).

The Assyrian threat appeared on the eastern horizon at a time when the northern kingdom was relatively prosperous. It might have seemed that it was cut off in its prime; but, as this passage shows, the telltale signs of descent into decay are already present. Flowers there may be, but they are fading. As Hosea expressed it, using a different image, “His hair is sprinkled with gray, but he does not notice” (Hos 7:9).

A strategically situated city may also be exposed to the elements. A destructive wind from the east (cf. 27:8 and comment there) was no stranger to Israel, though this time it is not the hot “sirocco” from the desert but a strong hail- and rain-bearing wind that would normally come from another direction (v.2). The prophet piles up words and phrases to convey the ferocity of the storm. The powerful and strong one is undefined, and the object of its attack is unexpressed; but they are obviously Assyria and Samaria respectively.

In vv.3 – 4 the language of v.1 reappears. The feet of the Assyrians will tramp through Samaria’s streets, and Samaria itself will be trampled on by the great foreign foe. Outside the city walls, figs will be growing. Sometimes a fig would ripen before the normal season, and a traveler — perhaps an Assyrian soldier on

his way into the city — would quickly pick and eat it. So suddenly will Samaria's destruction be (v.4).

5 – 6 Will this judgment on Samaria mean God's people will no longer have a wreath to adorn them? The prophet changes "pride" (gē'ût) in v.1 to "glory" (ṣᵉpîrâ) in the phrase translated "glorious crown" (v.5) because of the former's possibly unfavorable connotations; he asserts that this is what the Lord will be to "the remnant of his people." Their glorying has a physical focus, but this will be replaced by a spiritual one. Perhaps he has in mind the southern kingdom — so small in comparison with the northern, but with God in her midst — or else the remnant left behind in Israel by the receding Assyrian conquerors, or perhaps even both. A further possibility is that the phrase "in that day" is to be understaood eschatologically (see note at 2:11), the prophet's thought overleaping many intervening centuries to the last days.

The drunkards of v.1 are leaders of the people, such as priests and prophets (cf. v.7). There are probably judges among them as well. The administration of justice requires great wisdom and clearheadedness. Isaiah promises that God will himself be a spirit of justice giving wisdom to the judge, and the people's arms will have success against the foe (v.6). We are reminded of 11:1 – 5, where the Spirit of the Lord in all of his varied fullness rests on the Messiah, enabling him to dispense justice with righteous ness. Isaiah 32:1 associates just rulers with the righteous king.

7 – 8 In vv.5 – 6 there was a complete change of tone. Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) comments that Isaiah often introduces hope as a surprise.The remnant will have God as their crown when Samaria, the crown of Ephraim, has been taken by Assyria. But what is that remnant like *now*? In v.7 Isaiah turns his attention to Jerusalem's leaders (cf. v.14). Such a high destiny and such a low lifestyle! The vivid picture of spiritual guides lacking not only supernatural insight but even common reason — this surely is what "befuddled" suggests — is horrifying. We could wish it were caricature, but prophets like Isaiah declare truth without exaggeration. Nor unhappily is the drunken "minister" unknown to modern Christendom. The realistic description of the environment in v.8 bears all the marks of eyewitness reporting.

9 – 10 As the prophet has declared the word of God in this drink-dominated

setting, his hearers make their response. The NIV is probably correct in treating these verses as a quotation of the words of the drunkards. They feel insulted. Are they not themselves spiritual leaders, well able to teach others? What right has this man to place them in the classroom and teach them the spiritual ABCs? There is something ironic about the reference to milk (v.9) in such a context.

Many commentators have been puzzled by v.10 and have wrestled to make sense of the Hebrew.The truth seems to be, as the NIV margin suggests, that it is not meant to make sense. Isaiah's words have hardly penetrated the alcohol-impregnated atmosphere that surrounds his hearers. What they have picked up are simply stray syllables (*ṣaw lāṣāw ṣaw lāṣāw qaw lāqāw qaw lāqāw ze^{c}êr šām ze^{c}êr šām*), most of them repeated, like the baby talk that delights the child but insults an adult. They mouth this gibberish back at the prophet. The transmitter is as strong and clear as ever; it is the receivers who are at fault. Their judgment, in the meantime, is their failure to hear the word that could lead them back to God; but there is another judgment on its way, most appropriate in its form. Their sin has turned God's word through Isaiah into a meaningless noise that might just as well be a foreign language.

11 – 13 Very well then — the next message will come through foreigners (v.11). The Assyrian devastation of Judah (cf. 1:5 – 9) is surely in view. There is a striking aptness about this, because just as the drunkards pick up a few familiar sounds but no connected meaning, so the people of Judah will detect some similarities between the Assyrian Akkadian and their own Hebrew (both being Semitic tongues) without understanding what is being said. Of course, in reality it is through the Assyrians' swords rather than their words that God will speak his message to Israel.

Is drunkenness the people's main sin? No. More serious is their failure to hear God's word offering rest to those who insist on rejecting it (v.12). The prophet is clearly speaking of the call to faith. Ahaz has refused this (cf. chs. 7 – 8), and the attempts to link up with Egypt (cf. 30:1 – 3; 31:1 – 5, and the Introduction, p. 437) are contemporary examples of the same sin. Their disobedient refusal to trust God is therefore a continuing condition preventing them from hearing his word. The effects of drink may pass off, but unbelief can be a permanent barrier to that word.

Verse 13b is strongly reminiscent of 8:14 – 15, and this very fact conveys a message. On an earlier occasion, in the days of Ahaz, God pointed out the way of faith and warned the people against the consequences of rejecting it. Times may have changed but not the principles of God's dealings with his people. Then the call to faith was accompanied by a warning of the consequences of walking in another way; those consequences are the same now. Possibly, especially in view of the repetition of the drunkards' syllables from v.10, their fall is viewed first of all as a result of their own drunken staggering (v.7); but the range of analogies is then extended to the picture of the hunter's snare. If this is so, the wording is similar to 8:14 – 15 and the essential message the same, but the imaginative vehicle the message comes through is a little different. The inspired ideation of this prophet is so rich!

14 – 15 This passage underlines the objectivity of God's word. People may have lost their capacity to hear it, but this does not modify one whit its character as God's word. There is no question of its having to become his word in the context of experience, for they are commanded to hear it (v.14), even though it is unlikely to penetrate to their understanding simply because it is his, and unhearing humans are culpable.

In the book of Proverbs the scoffer is the worst type of sinner (e.g., Pr 1:22; 29:8; cf. Ps 1:1), for such a person is utterly contemptuous of the ways of God. Oswalt (in loc.) remarks that the word translated "scoffer" is the strongest negative term the OT uses to describe the wicked. There is an element of contempt discernible in the drunken responses of vv.9 – 10.

Rejection of God's word and confidence in our own often go hand in hand. Isaiah is not really quoting the "scoffers" (v.14) in v.15, of course, but ironically combining their words with his interpretation of their consequences. Clements writes (in loc.), "[Isaiah] is using heavily satirical language to characterize the political treaty upon which the leaders pride themselves as an act of political folly which will lead to their doom and death." There can be little doubt Isaiah has in mind the growing link between Judah and Egypt and the attempt in this way to warn off the Assyrians.

The "overwhelming scourge," as Young (in loc.) and others note, mixes figures, for how can a scourge overflow? The separate elements here are from

10:26 and 10:22 respectively (cf. also 8:8). The assonance of the two words is striking (see Notes), and Young draws attention to Delitzsch's perceptive comment (in loc.) that a whip when cracked moves in wavy lines. Perhaps Judah's leaders have the circumstances of the original Passover in mind.They think themselves immune, like Israel sheltered beneath sacrificial blood in Egypt (cf. 1:10 – 17), but there can be no such refuge in that land for them now.

The reference to "lies" and "falsehood" may be attacking that trust in expediency rather than principle that so often characterizes politicians. It seems more likely, however, that the prophet is not charging them directly with lack of integrity but that his words are still ironic. The assertion that Egypt will effectively come to their aid, which they believe to be sober truth, is in fact a lie. The alternative translation (NIV mg.) of *kāzāḇ* ("falsehood") as "false gods" (the word is sometimes used in this sense; e.g., Am 2:4) is less likely in this context.

16 – 19 Even a superficial examination of these verses reveals how much, in word and idea, they take up the prophet's words in this chapter. The conjunction *lākēn* ("so" or "therefore") that v.16 opens with indicates this logical connection with what God has already said in this oracle. The further connection between this prophecy and ch. 8 (see the comment on 28:13) is also instructive. In 8:14, the Lord himself declared he would be both a sanctuary — and Judah's sanctuary at Jerusalem was made of stone — and a stumbling stone for Israel. Faith would make the difference. Here the stone illustration — having already been developed, by implication, in a negative way in 28:13 — is presented eminently positively.

What then is meant by this stone? Concerning the divergent views held by both those who accept the MT as it stands and those who follow lQIsa in reading a Hebrew participle instead of a finite verb (cf. Notes), O. Kaiser summarizes (with documentation, in loc.):

> It has been identified with the law of Yahweh revealed upon Zion, the Temple upon Zion as the refuge of those faithful to Yahweh, the archetypal monarchy set up in the person of David, the city of Jerusalem on its hill, the saving work begun by Yahweh on Zion, Yahweh's relationship to his people, and even with the true community of believers already founded by God.. . . Those who have emended the verb into a participle and understood it in a future sense have interpreted the statement as referring to Zion as the righteous foundation by Yahweh, to the Messiah as the foundation stone of a temple not made with hands, faith, the remnant of believers, or very precisely to the statement that "He who believes will not waver," as Yahweh's promise.

What then does it mean? It is of great importance in the messianic teaching in Isaiah's prophecies. The NT treats it as messianic, and it is applied to Christ several times in the apostolic writings (Ro 9:33; 10:11; 1Pe 2:4 – 6). It is important, however, for us to see its appropriateness and its precise meaning within its OT context. In 8:14, in an oracle from the time of Ahaz, the prophet used the stone analogy most significantly. The Lord himself was calling people to faith. If they responded in faith, he would be a sanctuary, a holy place, to them. As God's temple was treated as a place of refuge (Ex 21:14; 1Ki 1:50), so God himself would be a holy place of refuge for them (cf. Eze 11:16). If, however, they refused belief, he would be a stone of stumbling they would fall over. The altar of stone was, of course, set within a temple of stone, so that both the promise and the threat there rest on the spiritualizing of the stone.

The context here is similar. The leadership of Judah is again refusing the way of faith by seeking alliance with Egypt. The prophet returns to his previous image while developing it differently. The stone-built temple again pictures the God they are to trust in. Instead of reapplying the stone illustration in a threat (but see v.13b), Isaiah declares God's condemnation of the wretched Egyptian makeshift that the rebellious, unbelieving people have constructed as a substitute for faith in their God. So the passage harmonizes perfectly both with its literary and historical contexts.

The stone is defined, as we will see, in terms of the analogy itself; but the reality of which it is the image is unspecified. A comparison of 8:14 and this passage shows that there the sanctuary and stone were God himself, whereas here the stone is laid by God. If this passage is a development of the former, we are bound to ask, "Who, in Isaiah's prophecies, is both God and distinct from him?" The clear answer is "the Messiah," as 9:6 (cf. 7:14) shows. The soundness of this approach is confirmed when we note that thematic development is a leading feature of mes-sianism in this book (cf. Introduction, pp. 455 – 58).

If the stone is the Messiah, what messianic qualities or functions emerge from the prophet's words? Most modern English versions render the verb as a present simple or continuous — viz., "I lay" (NIV) or "I am laying" (NASB; see Notes for discussion of the tense). Zion is itself the place both of the temple and of the residences of the leaders.

The stone is probably defined in a twofold way. First it is a tested or testing stone. If the adjective is active, it will simply indicate that the foundation stone has been tested for strength and shape; if passive, however, it may well refer to a topstone, shaped by the master mason for placing at the end of the whole building process, so forming a test of trueness of line for the whole edifice. This idea is found in Psalm 118:22 and applied to Christ in Mark 12:10. He comes as the consummation of the divine building project (sent “last of all,” Mk 12:6); and, although rejected by the religious leaders of his day — the spiritual counterparts of the unbelieving leaders here — he was actually God’s proof that the whole structure of messianic promise was sound. If the prophecy is truly messianic, then it is eschatological; and if eschatological, the idea of a capstone is most apt.We will take it in this sense, though this cannot be established beyond all doubt.

The testing stone is also “a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation.” This clearly points to the stone placed on the living rock, which is especially important because it is at the junction of two walls. He is “precious” because of his superlative value in the divine plan. The ultimate spiritual sanctuary will find its foundation in him. In the NT God’s great “building” is the church. Objectively this is built on Christ, while believers, such as Peter, established this foundation for others by confessing and proclaiming him (Mt 16:13 – 19). Here, too, is a call for faith.

If it is correct to see both topstone and foundation stone here, we have evidence of the freedom of the prophet in the use of analogies. In architecture the same stone cannot fulfill both purposes; but God gives one great answer to the totality of human need, and that answer is Christ. E. J.Young (in loc.) interprets the passage differently, viewing the testing as God’s testing of humans. Either view makes good sense.

The verb translated “dismayed” (חִישׁ) literally means “to hasten”; but it can be applied figuratively to emotions, as, for example, in Job 20:2, where it is rendered “greatly disturbed.” Alternatively, a literal rendering makes good sense because, as Mauchline (in loc.) says, it can suggest a contrast with waiting on God (cf. Isa 8:17; 25:9; 26:8; 30:18; 33:2; et al.).

The architectural language continues into v.17, where v.17a may anticipate v.17b or amplify the thought of v.16. On the one hand, divine justice and righteous ness may govern the entire building operation, from foundation to capstone, so that the entire edifice of promise and fulfillment is just and true. On the other hand, it may show up as unrighteous and false; the storms of God's judgment will demolish the flimsy human structures pictured as the refuge or hiding place (cf. v.2). Both interpretations are possible and little depends on a solution. A similar contrast between two buildings, where relationship to Christ and his teaching is the test of true construction, is found in Luke 6:46 – 49.

Verse 18 also uses language from earlier verses in the chapter, chiefly from v.15 but also from v.2, thus preserving some consistency of figure. It is water that will overflow the hiding place (v.17), sweep by and beat down (v.18), and carry the people away (v.19). Isaiah's pictorial gift enables him sometimes to move swiftly from one figure to another, while at other times to sustain a figure through several verses, yet with subtle variations and adaptations to clothe the development of his inspired thought.

The judgment will not pass quickly, with relief soon following fear. Verse 19 clearly suggests that wave after wave of the enemy will come into Judah, so that the people's hearts will be dominated by fear throughout the whole period. The NASB translates, "and it will be sheer terror to understand what it means," a particularly good translation, providing a kind of rhythmic climax to the whole of vv.14 – 19. In this way, then, God will speak — through hordes of cruel Assyrian warriors — his message of judgment to his people (cf. vv.11, 14), who will not hear the prophet's message (cf. vv.9 – 10 and comment there).

20 – 22 God's people have made their bed; now they must lie on it (v.20). They will then discover its inadequacy to provide true rest (cf. v.12). As we have made use of an English proverb, so Isaiah may be using a Hebrew one. In an earlier chapter the prophet used historical allusion to comfort his hearers (cf. 9:4; 10:26; to some extent, 1:9). Now such allusions become the vehicle of threats rather than promises. At Mount Perazim and in the valley of Gibeon (v.21; cf. Jos 10:1 – 11; 2Sa 5:17 – 25), God has, as it were, awoken from slumber (a possible suggestion that the bed and sleep illustration is still in Isaiah's mind) to come to his people's aid against their enemies.

“Perazim” means “breaking forth,” and this allusion may have been suggested by the waters of judgment in vv.2, 15, 17 – 19. God’s anger against the Philistines, dammed up so long by his people’s sin, broke forth and overwhelmed them through David; but that anger, held back again through many a year of grace, will finally burst in a “strange work” of judgment against his own people. Luther, Barth, and others have spoken in general terms of judgment as God’s strange work, basing their thought on this verse. In its context, of course, the expression relates to the strange phenomenon of judgment falling on God’s own people.

Isaiah’s reference to mocking (v.22) should be compared with v.14 and with the comment on vv.9 – 10. Those destined for judgment are bound with chains, suggesting there is no way to escape that destiny. Like Amos earlier (cf. Am 3:7 – 8), Isaiah’s auditory experience of God alerts him to a terrible coming judgment in which the whole land will be involved. The devastating Assyrian invasions, followed by the terrible siege and overthrow of Jerusalem by the Babylonians later on, progressively fulfills this prophecy in line with the terms of v.19.

23 – 29 Isaiah knows how obtuse and spiritually hard of hearing his listeners are; so, like the Lord Jesus (e.g., Mk 4:3, 9), he calls them to pay close attention to his words (v.23; cf. v.14; contrast v.9). It may even be that Christ’s exceptionally strong call for attention in the parable of the sower ref lects the inf luence of this passage, itself replete with agricultural language.

Verses 24 – 25 consist entirely of a series of rhetorical questions. They are based on the understood but never expressed analogy between the processes of agriculture and the ways of God with humans — what Henry Drummond called *Natural Law in the Spiritual World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897). Nature, as God has created it, contains so many illustrations of spiritual truth that the sensitive, godly observer is forced to conclude that there is divine design in this, just as there is in the phenomenon of typology in OT history.

The point made in v.24 is that agriculture requires the farmer to change his activity from time to time. Plowing is needed, but not year round. So God’s purposes require him to act differently at different seasons, perhaps sparing Jerusalem in 701 BC and destroying it in 586 BC. Also, a farmer does not

normally sow all of his fields with only one type of plant (v.25). In a mixed farming economy, space is found for varied crops. Once again, the variety of God's ways with people is being underlined. The farmer learns such things from God by a study perhaps of nature (v.26), so why are we so reluctant to learn from God in spiritual things?

Verses 27 – 29 take the illustration further. At harvest time, threshing takes different forms, each dictated by the type of crop harvested (v.27). Eventually threshing time comes to an end, for the ultimate aim of all this activity is to produce edible food (v.28). Plowing, sowing, threshing, and grinding are all means to this end. So God has his purposes in history, and through a sequence of events he brings them to pass (v.29). God's power ("the LORD Almighty") and wisdom, united in his nature, bring forth a pattern of events in the human story. Most of the agricultural processes here can suggest pain, perhaps implying it is possible to find oneself on the wrong side of God's purposes in history and so to experience his judgment. In fact, some such lesson seems required by the context.

Seitz (in loc.) stresses the more positive elements in this chapter. To him what is striking here is not so much God's judgment on the priests and prophets who are so seriously defaulting in their duty to God, for this can be paralleled elsewhere, but the fact that "Israel is not wholly doomed, so long as God's wisdom is available to those who will be instructed aright. . . . Those who believe will not falter or be swept away."

NOTES

10 The interpretation given above is now widely held, for it is difficult to derive proper sense from the Hebrew as it stands (see Wildberger, in loc.). The text of the NIV is about as near as the translator can get. There seem to be echoes of the Hebrew of v.8, suggesting that the interpretation in terms of broken syllables mouthed by their recipients is correct. Some suggest the syllables used are those a Hebrew mother would use to teach her child the alphabet; this is possible.

11 Paul quotes this verse in 1 Corinthi ans 14:21, where he seems to be

implying that uninterpreted — and therefore meaningless — glossolalia will simply confirm the unbelieving hearer in his sin and so anticipate his judgment. Whether in Isaiah's day, Paul's, or ours, it is meaningful utterance — a message from God, addressed to the understanding — that humans need in order to bring them to the sure foundation of faith.

15 For "grave" the NIV margin has "Sheol" (see comment on 5:14).

16 The MT has the Piel perfect יִסַּד (*yissad*, "he has founded"), while lQIsab and the LXX read the Qal active participle יֹסֵד (*yōsed*, "founding" or "about to found"). The real problem perhaps lies in the preceding first person pronoun.Young (in loc.) helpfully mentions the view of Rashi, the medieval Jewish commentator, that this is a simple case of ellipsis, so that we should follow the MT and read, "Behold! I am he who founds" (cf. NIV, "I lay").

25, 27 – 28 The various crops were all common in Palestine. For detailed comments both on the crops and the farming methods referred to here, see E. W. Heaton, *Everyday Life in Old Testament Times* (London: Batsford, 1956), 97 – 115; *ZPEB*, 1:71 – 78, 1037.

29 The terminological connection between this verse and the messianic passage 9:6 should be noted. There could be a suggestion that God is working in history to a messianic end, though it is not possible to assert this categorically.

B. Woe to Ariel (29:1 – 24)

OVERVIEW

This chapter presents the second "woe" oracle in this section of Isaiah's prophecies (see Overview to 28:1 – 33:24). The word *hôy* ("woe") occurs twice in this chapter (vv.1, 15), but the intimate link between v.15 and its preceding context suggests it is not intended to open a fresh oracle. Despite this double use of the word, the atmosphere, though solemn, is not one of unrelieved gloom. Not only judgment for Jerusalem but also her salvation is promised.

1 Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel,
the city where David settled!
Add year to year
and let your cycle of festivals go on.
2 Yet I will besiege Ariel;
she will mourn and lament, she will be to me like an altar hearth.
3 I will encamp against you all around;
I will encircle you with towers
and set up my siege works against you.
4 Brought low, you will speak from the ground;
your speech will mumble out of the dust.
Your voice will come ghostlike from the earth;
out of the dust your speech will whisper.
5 But your many enemies will become like fine dust,
the ruthless hordes like blown chaff.
Suddenly, in an instant, 6 the LORD Almighty will come
with thunder and earthquake and great noise,
with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.
7 Then the hordes of all the nations that fight against Ariel,
that attack her and her fortress and besiege her,
will be as it is with a dream,
with a vision in the night —
8 as when a hungry man dreams that he is eating,
but he awakens, and his hunger remains;
as when a thirsty man dreams that he is drinking,
but he awakens faint, with his thirst unquenched.
So will it be with the hordes of all the nations
that fight against Mount Zion.

9 Be stunned and amazed,
blind yourselves and be sightless;
be drunk, but not from wine,
stagger, but not from beer.
10 The LORD has brought over you a deep sleep:
He has sealed your eyes (the prophets);
he has covered your heads (the seers).
11 For you this whole vision is nothing but words sealed in a scroll. And if you give the scroll to someone who can read, and say to him, “Read this, please,” he will answer, “I can’t; it is sealed.”
12 Or if you give the scroll to someone who cannot read, and say,“Read this, please,” he will answer, “I don’t know how to read.”
13 The Lord says:
“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me
is made up only of rules taught by men.
14 Therefore once more I will astound these people
with wonder upon wonder;
the wisdom of the wise will perish,
the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”
15 Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from the LORD,
who do their work in darkness and think,
“Who sees us? Who will know?”
16 You turn things upside down,
as if the potter were thought to be like the clay!
Shall what is formed say to him who formed it,
“He did not make me”?
Can the pot say of the potter,
“He knows nothing”?
17 In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field
and the fertile field seem like a forest?
18 In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind will see.
19 Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD;
the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.
20 The ruthless will vanish,
the mockers will disappear,
and all who have an eye for evil will be cut down —
21 those who with a word make a man out to be guilty,
who ensnare the defender in court
and with false testimony deprive the innocent of justice.
22 Therefore this is what the LORD, who redeemed Abraham, says to the house of Jacob:
“No longer will Jacob be ashamed;

no longer will their faces grow pale.
23 When they see among them their children,
the work of my hands, they
will keep my name holy;
they will acknowledge the holiness of the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.
24 Those who are wayward in spirit will gain understanding;
those who complain will accept instruction."

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 This chapter begins with a mystery. What does the reiterated "Ariel" mean? The city's connection with David (v.1) and the reference to Mount Zion (v.8) indicates its identification with Jerusalem. Why call it "Ariel"? The last clause of v.2 makes this clear. As the NIV margin says, "The Hebrew for *hearth* sounds like the Hebrew for *Ariel*" (emphasis theirs). Yes, but does this mean the prophet has invented this name to introduce such a play on words? This seems most unlikely, as paronomasia, so common in the OT, loses its force if it loses its naturalness. The name Ariel does possess a certain naturalness if it actually means altar hearth, so that in all four occurrences (two in v.1 and two in v.2) it would bear the same meaning. Its naturalness derives from the fact that Jerusalem was a place of sacrifice, with an altar hearth in the temple where animal carcasses were always burning. I take this to be the meaning and discuss other possibilities in the Notes.

The NIV margin does not make it clear that "altar hearth" in v.2 is exactly the same word "Ariel" and not simply like it in sound. So in this sentence the word is not simply a name but actually *means* something, and what it means is not "hearth" but "altar hearth."

The word ḥānâ occurs in both vv.1 and 3. In v.1 it seems better to translate "encamped" rather than "settled," so bringing the two verses into line. David besieged Jerusalem when it was a Jebusite stronghold. When he took it, it became his capital city. Through many a difficult century in its history it had never been taken again.The true poignancy of the "woe" here is that the God who enabled David to take it will now besiege this city himself, through its enemies (v.5), and will cause its destruction by fire just as though the whole city has become an extension of the altar hearth within its temple.

The popular theology of sacrifice in the eighth century BC exaggerated its place in the relationship between God and his people, so that religion was conceived to be almost purely external and ritualistic (cf. 1:10 – 17; 29:13). The point of the ironic exhortations in v.1b is that it was at the festivals of the religious calendar that the Jerusalem altar was busiest. At these times, given this false popular theology, the people became more and more confirmed in their false assurance that all was well between themselves and God. What a shock awaits them! Verse 3, with its threefold statement that God will become their enemy, is most forceful.

Verse 4 is probably best understood as developing the statement "she will mourn and lament" in v.2. Penitence of spirit, so conspicuously absent from the sacrifices the people are making, will at last come about through divine chastisement. Isaiah often uses the language of physical exaltation and abasement in relation to pride and humility (see comment on 2:2 – 4). Instead of pompous boasting (cf. 28:15), their speech will come as a mere ghostlike whisper from the ground where they lie prostrate. This does not imply belief in the real possibility of communications from the dead (see comment on 8:19). An illustration does not necessarily imply truth in the analogy used, only acquaintance with it.

5 – 8 The whole mood of the oracle now changes as suddenly and dramatically as the events it depicts. God will judge his people by sending their enemies against their capital, but he does not intend for the city to be taken. The ominous towers and siegeworks are replaced by fine dust and blown chaff (v.5), fit symbols of insubstantiality (cf. 40:15) and judgment (cf. Pss 1:4; 35:5). Those sent in judgment will themselves experience it (cf. Isa 10:5 – 19). Appearing to be so formidable, they will be cut down to size.

The "many enemies" are further described in v.7 as "the hordes of all the nations," and the coming of the Lord Almighty in terms suggesting a most awe-inspiring intervention. Does such language fit even the dramatic act of God recorded in chs. 36 – 37? This is questionable. Perhaps we should see partial fulfillment in these events of 701 BC but the ultimate fulfillment in a passage such as Revelation 20:8 – 9 (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 51). The language (esp. Isa 29:6) is so reminiscent of Exodus 19 that it suggests the God of judgment is

also the God of the law, his judgments expressing his concern for righteousness.

Isaiah's illustrations are not only appropriate; they are also true to the common experience of humanity. We all know something of the dream that seems as vivid and compelling as reality itself. The city of Jerusalem, which seems so real a prize to its attackers, will suddenly be seen to belong to the dreamworld of military ambition. The designation "Mount Zion" itself has overtones of stability and divine protection (cf. Ps 48).

9 – 12 The inaugural vision of Isaiah's prophetic ministry made him aware that as he declared the word of God, many of his hearers, far from being enlightened and coming out of sin-induced blindness into the full light of God, would simply shut their eyes to the truth (cf. 6:9 – 10). This theme of darkness and light has already received one major exposition in the prophecies (8:16 – 9:7). The spiritual blindness of the drunken religious leaders was emphasized in ch. 28. Now the theme occurs again and in a way suggesting allusion to both former passages.

The imperatives of v.9 remind us of those in ch. 6 and the references to drink to ch. 28. The professional prophets, whether literally drunk or not, are pictured as stumbling unsteadily through life, unable even to plot their own course, let alone point the way to others. Blindness, drunkenness, and sleep build up a picture of total inadequacy in the realm of spiritual leadership (vv.9 – 10).

The point of vv.11 – 12 is that Isaiah's own God-given vision is a closed book to the people of Jerusalem. To the one who can read — perhaps the professional prophet, who knows something of the technical language of prophecy — the vision contains mysteries to which his eyes are closed (v.11). The one who cannot read — perhaps the ordinary inhabitant of Jerusalem — is removed further still from understanding (v.12). The seeming advantage of the professional prophet does not really place him ahead of the common person, for neither can understand the vision.

13 – 16 The spiritual blindness of vv.9 – 12 appropriately partners the externalism and traditionalism of v.13. So often these qualities are associated in godless religion. As Motyer (1993, in loc.), says, "Religion remains but reality has perished." In 1:15 the God of Israel rejected prayers offered in a formalistic

spirit. Here the spiritual condition is diagnosed and found to be malign indeed.

Verse 13 is quoted by our Lord in Matthew 15:9 with reference to the Pharisees, and the spiritual parallel is striking. In both cases wrong teaching is based on a mishandling of God's true revelation — the sacrificial regulations and the Mosaic law as a whole. In each case tradition allied to bad theology has resulted in a mishandling of Scripture, and in each the result is self-justifying complacency in the presence of the most holy God. "Rules taught by men" applies, of course, not to the Leviti-cal teaching itself but to the way it is applied by the priests. Human nature does not change through the years but finds different religious as well as nonreligious expressions of its fundamental rebellion against God.

So often in Isaiah's prophecies he says in effect that the God of Israel, who has shown himself to his people in one of his great attributes for their blessing, will demonstrate that same quality in an act of judgment (see comments at 10:17 and 28:20 – 22). He is "wonderful" (*pelē'*) and has done wonderful things for his people (Ex 15:11; Ps 77:11 – 15; cf. Isa 9:6), but his power to astound them is turned against them. The prophet seems still to have in mind the judgments God decreed against his people in vv.1 – 3; the repetition of "woe" in v.15 confirms this (Paul quotes v.14 in 1 Corinthi ans 1:19). Isaiah shows great interest in the distinction between worldly and godly wisdom (e.g., Isa 5:21; 11:2; 26:7 – 10).This makes a verse such as v.14 most appropriate in the context of 1 Corinthians 1.

Negotiations with Egypt to form an antiAssyrian alliance were probably carried on in secret. If that is in view in v.15, Isaiah implies that the negotiators think their actions so clandestine that even the Lord himself is denied access to them. When human minds are not controlled by God's self-revelation, their thoughts of him easily become unworthy of what he really is.The prophet suggests that such people have a completely illogical view of God. Without doubt, total depravity so affects the mind that people can no longer think God's thoughts after him in any adequate way.

Isaiah anticipates Jeremiah in the illustration of the potter and the clay (v.16; cf. 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:1 – 6). Paul, too, uses this illustration in Romans 9:19 – 21. Each of the three makes somewhat different points, yet each argue for the

sovereignty of God from this analogy. The Assyrians, too, have boasted of their independence from this sovereign God (10:15).

17 – 21 Significantly, even when the human mind retreats from logic in its conception of God, God still addresses that mind. The questions of v.16 are therefore followed by a further question in v.17. Translators and commentators have understood this verse in quite different ways. The NIV's rendering — "in a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest?"— appears to be a promise of blessing for the land (cf. also NASB). The NEB, however, presents a picture of natural retrogression: "The time is but short before Lebanon goes back to grassland and the grassland is no better than scrub." The TEV gives, like Psalm 107:33 – 38, a promise followed by a threat, though these are in reverse order in the psalm.

What then are we to make of v.17? Skinner (in loc.), pointing out its resemblance to 32:15, says:

> The idea in both passages is the same. Lebanon is here not a symbol of the heathen world-power (as in x.34), but a synonym for forest-land in general, corresponding to "wilderness" (uncultivated pasture-land) in xxxii. 15. The second half of the verse is not a contrast to the first, but a climax. While Lebanon actually becomes a fruitful field, what is now a fruitful field shall then be *counted* no better than a forest. (emphasis his)

This transformation of the physical world then becomes the introduction to the eschatological picture presented in the remainder of the chapter. This interpretation best fi ts the general context.

The people's former spiritual insensitivity will be a thing of the past (cf. 35:5 – 6). Isaiah shows a concern for the godly poor (cf. 3:14; 11:4; 25:4). The fact that the reference to them in v.19 is followed by a promise that evil men, especially those who "deprive the innocent of justice" (v.21), will be cut down certainly suggests Isaiah has in mind the restoration of justice to the oppressed in the messianic kingdom (cf. 11:3 – 4), even though this is not made explicit. Once again (see comment on 26:7 – 11) we seem almost to be in the book of Proverbs. For the "mockers" (v.20), see comment on 28:14, where the same Hebrew word is translated "scoffers." To "have an eye for evil" reminds us of a passage such as Proverbs 1:11 – 14.

The general picture of rampant malignity presented in v.20 becomes more specific in v.21, where the reader is transported to the court of law. “In court” is literally “in the gate” (cf. NASB), for this was where justice was dispensed (Dt 21:18 – 20; Ru 4:1). Each of the three lines relates to a verbal sin, the clever and specious use of words that perverts justice. The OT prophets stressed the Lord’s hatred of oppression that was furthered by the manipulation of the courts of justice (see comment on 10:1 – 4).

22 – 24 It is sometimes assumed that this passage is late, many centuries after Isaiah, because of the reference to the redemption of Abraham. It is true that the late noncanonical *Apocalypse of Abraham* refers to the way God delivered him from persecution by idolaters in Mesopotamia, but this seems to be a natural imaginative extension of the story of a greatly revered ancestor. It is unnecessary to read this kind of thing into the simple word “redeemed” here (v.22).

Joshua 24:14 links the region “beyond the River” with Egypt as places where the people had served other gods. The language of redemption was regularly applied to the deliverance from Egypt, and there is no good reason why it could not be applied to Abraham’s exit from Ur at God’s call. There may not have been the same human bondage, but in both cases they were under a regime acknowledging other gods. The passage makes much of the people’s relationship to their ancestor Jacob, and the mention of Abraham reinforces still more this emphasis on the past. The prophet is probably thinking of the promises made to the patriarchs by the God of Israel and the fact that the prophecies given to him involved their fulfillment.

Most English versions obscure the oscillation of grammatical number in vv.22 – 23.The NIV brings this out in v.22, while the RSV is more accurate in v.23,“For when he sees his children, the work of his hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name.” In the Hebrew, grammatical consistency is sacrificed to show that the prophet has both the patriarch and his descendants in mind. There is such solidarity between a people and their ancestor that they can be closely identified in this way.

The shame of Jacob, when considered in the light of the context, certainly seems to be the dispersion of many of Israel’s people from the land because of their sin (see Dt 28:36 – 37, 63 – 64; see comment on Isa 25:8). Their God will

bring their scattered children back to the land (v.23). N. H. Snaith (*Notes on the Hebrew Text of Isaiah XXVIII – XXXII* [Lon-don: Epworth, 1945], 40) comments that v.23a is "a passage which is not as difficult as is generally thought, if it is taken as belonging to the same set of circumstances as xlix.14 – 25." He is surely correct.

Isaiah's characteristic title for God is "the Holy One of Israel" (see Introduction, p. 446). This holiness sets him apart from all other beings, not least the false gods worshiped in the great civilizations of the Fertile Crescent.Thus there is probably a subtle connection between the reference to Abraham's redemption (from idolatrous Ur and Haran) and the assertion that when the scattered Israelites are brought back from the pagan lands of their dispersion, they will keep God's name holy. The emphasis on his holiness is strong.

It is as though this is their God's final vindication of his great name at the climax of their history. Awe that is inspired by wondering gratitude will bring about this profound sense of "the godhood of God." This deep awareness of God's goodness to them as a nation will produce a penitent, receptive spirit in those who were formerly wayward and complaining. God's own light will disperse the spiritual darkness that the prophet is so conscious of in the people he addresses, as vv.9 – 16 reveal (cf. 6:9 – 10).

NOTES

1 אֲרִיאֵל (*ʾărîʾēl*) has been variously understood. Young (in loc.) presents the main options in a useful note.Those who reject the meaning given in the commentary above, which follows the Targum, usually take it to mean "lion of God," suggestive perhaps of the strength and majesty of this royal city. This does make good sense, and its claims can be strengthened by the reference to David, who made it royal for Israel. However, the mention of the feasts tends to support the interpretation given above, as does a reference to "the altar hearth of David" in the Moabite Stone (line 12) and the use of the term in this sense in Ezekiel 43:15 – 16. The suggestion of O. Procksch (*Jesaia I* [Leipzig: A. Deichertsche, 1930]) that Jerusalem, like Mycene, had a lion gate is conjectural and unnecessary.

4 O. Kaiser has a helpful note here (in loc.):

> In verse 4 he juxtaposes two different conceptions, the first that of a person who has fallen to the ground and begs his conqueror for mercy, and the second that of a dead person who speaks out of the earth like a ghost with a voice reduced to a whisper. This makes clear that the enemy attack which God himself has brought about will bring Jerusalem into the utmost distress and that, rescued [sic] to humility (cf. 2:9; 5:15; 20:33) the city will beg its God for deliverance.

5 The MT has אֲרִיאֵל (*ʾărîʾēl*) "aliens"), but the LXX and Targum assume אֲרִיאֵל (*ʾărîʾēl*) , "enemies"), which is read by lQIsa; this is probably correct. The comment above assumes that the reference to the enemies like fine dust or blown chaff describes their judgment. Some commentators, however, think the similes relate rather to their vast numbers, just as in God's promises about the growth of Israel it is often likened to the sand on the seashore. If this is so — and it is not impossible — v.5 should be taken with vv.1 – 4 rather than vv.6 – 8.

10 The words "the prophets" and "the seers" are in apposition to the phrases they follow. They need not be omitted as glosses, as suggested by Clements et al., for 28:7 shows their appropriateness.

16 The NIV follows lQIsa in reading חֹמֶר (*ḥōmer*, "the pot"; lit., "clay") instead of אָמַר (*ʾāmar*, "should say"), which looks like a scribal error in the MT, as the same verb occurs earlier in the verse.

17 The reference to Lebanon here may not be to its trees but to the vast areas of mountain slope — impossible to cultivate — it possessed. See the comment above.

C. Woe to the Rebellious Children (30:1 – 33)

OVERVIEW

This chapter, like chs. 28 and 29, commences with *hôy* (“woe”) and, also like them, contains promises as well as threats. The people of Jerusalem will have judgments to face, but these will not annul the ultimate purpose of their God to bless them with his salvation.

1 “Woe to the obstinate children,”
declares the LORD,
“to those who carry out plans that are not mine,
forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit,
heaping sin upon sin;
2 who go down to Egypt
without consulting me;
who look for help to Pharaoh’s protection,
to Egypt’s shade for refuge.
3 But Pharaoh’s protection will be to your shame,
Egypt’s shade will bring you disgrace.
4 Though they have officials in Zoan
and their envoys have arrived in Hanes,
5 everyone will be put to shame
because of a people useless to them,
who bring neither help nor advantage,
but only shame and disgrace.”
6 An oracle concerning the animals of the Negev:
Through a land of hardship and distress,
of lions and lionesses,
of adders and darting snakes,
the envoys carry their riches on donkeys’ backs,
their treasures on the humps of camels,
to that unprofitable nation,
7 to Egypt, whose help is utterly useless.
herefore I call her
Rahab the Do-Nothing.
8 Go now, write it on a tablet for them,
inscribe it on a scroll,
that for the days to come
it may be an everlasting witness.

9 These are rebellious people, deceitful children,
children unwilling to listen to the LORD’s instruction.
10 They say to the seers,
“See no more visions!”
and to the prophets,
“Give us no more visions of what is right!
Tell us pleasant things,
prophesy illusions.
11 Leave this way,
get off this path,
and stop confronting us
with the Holy One of Israel!”
12 Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says:
“Because you have rejected this message,
relied on oppression
and depended on deceit,
13 this sin will become for you
like a high wall, cracked and bulging,
that collapses suddenly, in an instant.
14 It will break in pieces like pottery,
shattered so mercilessly
that among its pieces not a fragment will be found
for tak2ing coals from a hearth
or scooping water out of a cistern.”
15 This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says:
“In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it.
16 You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’
Therefore you will flee!
You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’
Therefore your pursuers will be swift!
17 A thousand will flee
at the threat of one;
at the threat of five
you will all flee away,
till you are left
like a flagstaff on a mountaintop,
like a banner on a hill.”
18 Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you;
he rises to show you compassion.
For the LORD is a God of justice.
Blessed are all who wait for him!
19 O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. 20Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your

own eyes you will see them. 21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.” 22 Then you will defie your idols overlaid with silver and your images covered with gold; you will throw them away like a menstrual cloth and say to them, “Away with you!”

23 He will also send you rain for the seed you sow in the ground, and the food that comes from the land will be rich and plentiful. In that day your cattle will graze in broad meadows. 24 The oxen and donkeys that work the soil will eat fodder and mash, spread out with fork and shovel. 25 In the day of great slaughter, when the towers fall, streams of water will flow on every high mountain and every lofty hill. 26 The moon will shine like the sun, and the sunlight will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven full days, when the LORD binds up the bruises of his people and heals the wounds he inflicted.

27 See, the Name of the LORD comes from afar,
with burning anger and dense clouds of smoke;
his lips are full of wrath,
and his tongue is a consuming fire.
28 His breath is like a rushing torrent,
rising up to the neck.
He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction;
he places in the jaws of the peoples
a bit that leads them astray.
29 And you will sing
as on the night you celebrate a holy festival;
your hearts will rejoice
as when people go up with flutes
to the mountain of the LORD,
to the Rock of Israel.
30 The LORD will cause men to hear his majestic voice
and will make them see his arm coming down
with raging anger and consuming fire,
with cloudburst, thunderstorm and hail.
31 The voice of the LORD will shatter Assyria;
with his scepter he will strike them down.
32 Every stroke the LORD lays on them
with his punishing rod
will be to the music of tambourines and harps,
as he fights them in battle with the blows of his arm.
33 Topheth has long been prepared;
it has been made ready for the king.
Its fire pit has been made deep and wide,
with an abundance of fire and wood;
the breath of the LORD,
like a stream of burning sulfur,
sets it ablaze.

COMMENTARY

1 The occasion is still the proposal to enter an alliance with Egypt as a defense against Assyria, whose dark shadow looms menacingly on the eastern horizon. Several commentators notice the double entendre in v.1, preserved in the NASB, while the NIV's "obstinate" instead of "rebellious" tends to obscure it. The rebellion against Assyria was also a revolt against God. The verb *sārar* is often used of a rebellious son (cf. Dt 21:18, 20; Ps 78:8; Jer 5:23); and the full phrase "rebellious children" reminds us of Isaiah 1:2, though the verb is different there.

The Chris tian reader, noting the parallelism in v.1, may view its phrasing as showing that Isaiah has a trinitarian theology, or at least that to him God and his Spirit are one. It is doubtful, however, whether so much can be built on it; for the Spirit may be looked on here simply as the agent of God's will, revealing his purpose to the people through the prophet for their obedience.

The people's accumulation of sin is probably an allusion to the alliance with Assyria in the days of Ahaz, a device to secure aid against Israel and Syria. This, of course, forms the background to the oracles in chs. 7 – 9. The political alignment is now different but expresses the same sin: refusal to trust in the Lord and in him alone.

2 – 5 The redemption of Abraham was mentioned in 29:22. At one time when he went down through the Negev (as v.6) to Egypt without consulting God (Ge 12) he, too, may have pleaded an adequate reason, for there was famine in the land; but his action had shameful consequences both for himself and his wife. Perhaps, too, the reference to a descent to Egypt in both passages may have disapproving as well as topographical significance. The Ethiopian rulers of Egypt sent ambassadors to Judah either in 712 or 705 BC (see introduction to ch. 18). Here the ambassage moves in the opposite direction, perhaps when Hezekiah revolted against Sennacherib in the years 703 – 701 BC (see the Introduction, pp. 437 – 38). The two important towns mentioned (v.4) were both in Lower Egypt, though Hanes, in the region of modern Fayyum, was much farther south than Zoan (see comment on 19:11).

Isaiah's stress on "shame and disgrace" (v.5) is so strong that it may well have some special significance. Perhaps Egypt's failure to send adequate assistance to

Judah has brought about the disgrace of one of Hezekiah's leading advisers.

6 – 7 These two verses display Isaiah's imaginative power. It is characteristic of him not only to visualize Hezekiah's emissaries arriving at Egypt's court but also to picture the terrain they have to pass through and the very animals of both the environment and the Judean caravans (v.6). At the end of the journey, too, is an "animal"— Rahab (v.7), the Egyptian dragon. The Negev, to the south of Judah, was inhospitable to travelers. This is perhaps why the messengers go this way, desiring a measure of secrecy and so avoiding the more public route along the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

"Lions and lionesses" occurs in reverse order in the Hebrew, perhaps bearing testimony to the well-known fact that in this animal "the female of the species is more deadly than the male." The large number of words for "lion" in the Semitic languages gives some impression of the wildness and danger of much of the Near East in biblical times. The NIV's "darting snakes" renders the same Hebrew word as "darting, venomous serpent" in 14:29. It hardly seems necessary to see this as a fabulous monster rather than an actual reptile, as many commentators do. If the Negev was tangible, presumably its creatures were also, though we grant that the stress could be on the danger envisaged and feared by the minds of the travelers.

The journey is not only dangerous but also costly, for it is expedient to carry a substantial bribe to this powerful potential ally. But is Egypt really all that powerful? Its reputation — no doubt influenced somewhat by the tyrannous exercise of its authority over Israel before the exodus — was undoubtedly great; and the advent of a new, vigorous regime may well have enhanced it, but Hezekiah is in for a shock. Great powers on the international scene have chosen fearsome animal symbols such as the lion, the eagle (both single- and double-headed), and the bear. Egypt's designation was not self-chosen but identified by others with the mythological Rahab (see *ZPEB*, 5:27, and comment at 27:1).

The NIV's "Rahab the Do-Nothing" (v.7) may owe something to Moffat's striking but somewhat free "Dragon Do-Nothing." Miscall, 78, points out that naming and renaming are central motifs in Isaiah (1:26; 4:1 – 3; 7:14; 8:1 – 4; 62:4). There may be an ironic suggestion here that the Judean messengers to Egypt are in more danger from the beasts of the desert than Assyria will be from

that notorious super-monster, Egypt! If Assyria is to be shattered, it will be done, as we learn in v.31, not by Egypt but by God.

8 – 11 Prophecy takes two forms, spoken and written. In spoken prophecy, only the immediate audience benefits. Written prophecy may reach many more, and not simply in one generation. The command to write (v.8) has brought untold blessing and challenge to countless numbers. What is Isaiah to write? Perhaps just the ironic name for Egypt (v.7), just as he wrote his son's symbolic name on a tablet once before (cf. 8:1).Alternatively, the whole oracle may be in view. The purpose is to secure an objective, visible witness to God's solemn warning. Perhaps the prophet dated it in some way, though the text makes no reference to this. The words "for them" are significant, and vv.9 – 11 expound the necessity for this written warning.

The prophet repeats his accusation that the people are rebellious (v.9; cf. v.1 and 1:2). Their words (v.10) to the true prophets of God, such as Isaiah himself, are similar in intent to the advice the ungodly priest Amaziah gave to Amos: "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy any more at Bethel" (Am 7:12 – 13). An apostate priesthood and a rebellious people reject warnings that come through God's true prophet.

Amaziah would have been quite content had Amos continued to preach the authentic word of God, so long as this was done somewhere else. Isaiah's listeners will listen to him, but only if the content of his message is trimmed to their own desires. But the preacher must bring a message to his listeners, not find it among them. The words "way" and "path" (v.11; cf. 26:7 – 8), with their moral overtones (cf. Ps 1), may be a sarcastic echoing of Isaiah's own message to them, indicating that prophetic morality is unacceptable to such hearers.

The people's closing command to Isaiah is striking. His distinctive title for God is "the Holy One of Israel" (see Introduction, p. 446). This title, implying the great demands a relationship to such a God entails (cf. Am 3:2), fills their hearts with loathing. Their ears can no longer tolerate its sound. As Motyer (1993, in loc.) puts it, "They did not ask that preaching should cease but only that it be innocuous." They have had many successors!

12 – 14 Isaiah's use of the title "the Holy One of Israel" here (v.12) is particularly significant. The people have resisted his use of it, but he is not their servant but the Lord's. Nothing will be trimmed to suit their taste. As Young (in loc.) says, "The One whom the nation would cause to cease is the One who will cause the nation to cease. He speaks, and his words are an announcement of destruction to come. Yet he gives a reason why this is so, and that reason is found in the people's despising the word that Isaiah had spoken." Our reaction to God's word does not affect that word one whit.

In the context the people's reliance on oppression and deceit (v.12) is probably a reference to Egypt. For Israel Egypt was the oppressor *par eminence*, and at this time her promises of aid are worthless and so must be considered deceitful.

Sin contains the seeds of its own punishment, and Judah's trust in a foreign power rather than in God will bring about her downfall. We previously commented on Isaiah's gift of illustration, noting that he sometimes gives a simile or metaphor followed by a further picture that illustrates the illustration (e.g., 28:4). A small fault may spread, like leaven, and the onlooker may become so accustomed to the bulging wall that he does not detect the worsening of the problem until the collapse comes and it is too late (30:13). Spiritual and moral deterioration are often like this.

The prophet must convey not only the suddenness of the judgment but also its completeness. He does this by likening the wall's destruction to the breaking of an article of pottery (v.14); the disintegration is so complete that nothing of value, even for the most elementary and humble of uses, remains. O. Kaiser (in loc.) helps us make the cultural transference when he says, "In a period when there were no matches or lighters, people would rake through the ashes to find a glowing ember in order to light a new fire, and . . . in a country which was short of water they would be glad to make use of puddles." This prophecy was not, of course fulfilled in 701 but in 586, when Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, and perhaps even more fully in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (cf. the words of Christ in Mk 13:2).

15 – 18 Isaiah not only uses titles for God, he combines them, often with striking effect (see comment on 1:24). "The Sovereign LORD" (v.15) translates *Adonai* followed by *Yahweh*, thus combining his sovereign authority with his

redemptive name. Sovereignty and holiness find expression in vv.16 – 17, while redeeming grace, joined to these qualities, is seen in vv.15 and 18.

God's word cuts across ordinary human thinking, for his thoughts are higher than human thoughts (55:8 – 9). Those who have learned from God will turn to him in repentant faith, but continued rebellion against him produces panic when the foe appears in all his might. "Repentance" here is literally "returning," and this probably has the same double entendre noted in v.1. In the context of the contemporary political situation, to turn away from trust in Egypt and to return to the Lord are two sides of the same fact. Again the Shear-Jashub theme sounds (cf. comment on 7:3). The Hebrew word translated "your salvation" is emphatic.

Verse 16 has been understood in more than one way. Some, taking the verb *nûs* (twice translated "flee" here) to mean "to make haste," assume that the prophet overhears the people's boast that they will speed away to attack Assyria using horses obtained from the Egyptians. This is possible; but the verb's normal meaning makes good sense if they are fleeing for Egyptian help, which the prophet characterizes as a flight to disaster (v.17). (See 8:1 – 4, where Isaiah's son's name conveys the same thought but in somewhat different circumstances.)

The language of v.17a strikes an ominous note. God had promised overwhelming victory to his people if they obeyed him but overwhelming defeat if they were rebellious (Lev 26:7 – 8; Dt 32:30).The language of this threat is used here. The lonely hill signal, which served in a divine promise to suggest a fresh rallying of the scattered nation (Isa 11:10 – 12), here stands for shattering defeat. The whole army has gone into battle and met its death; the flag-bearer, kept back at the hilltop base in case he was needed for rallying purposes, discovers he alone is left and so is without function.

The threatening tone of vv.16 – 17 gives place to an assurance that God is ready and willing to show mercy to his foolish, obstinate people. Verse 18 is easier to understand in the more literal rendering of the RSV at this point: "Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you." It is precisely because God's justice must be expressed — and therefore punishment must fall on this rebellious people — that his mercy's manifestation is delayed. As often in the prophets, God's judgment falls first, but a remnant preserved through the judgment experiences the blessings of his grace and the fulfillment of his

positive purpose for them. “All who wait for him” are identical with this remnant. The Babylonian exile and the return from it are chiefly in view here.

19 – 26 The poetic statement of divine grace in v.18 is amplified by this section in elevated prose.The God of Israel speaks to his people as though addressing the heart of one person, for singular rather than plural forms are used most of the time. There is a solidarity among the people of Jerusalem that allows that city to be viewed as a single entity, a kind of corporate person, whom God addresses in grace. Here is the marvel of God’s immediate response to the penitent’s cry. The emphasis on his graciousness conveyed by the Hebrew is well expressed by the NIV’s “How gracious. . . !” They were so dull of hearing when he spoke to them (28:7 – 10; 29:9 – 10; 30:8 – 11), but at their cry he comes immediately to meet them in their need. He still hears the cry of repentance today.

Some (e.g., O. Kaiser, in loc.) take “the bread of adversity and the water of affliction” (v.20) figuratively, after the pattern of Amos 8:11 – 12, where “famine” is applied to a dearth of the prophetic word. Others (e.g.,Young, in loc.) relate this expression to the food eaten by prisoners of war (cf. 1Ki 22:27). Either is appropriate, for the expression probably relates to the exile, beyond which God will exhibit his grace to them.

The people’s penitence will be accompanied by new responsiveness to God’s word through the prophetic teachers commissioned to bring it.Rejection of that word always brings hardness of heart, so that the word cannot be heard as before (cf. 6:9 – 10; 29:9 – 12). There is probably an intentional contrast between v.21 and vv.10 – 11. The word of God has ethical thrust, thus keeping God’s people to the right path. It also possesses religious content, for their response will lead them to purge their land of idolatry.

The reference to the silver or golden covering of the wooden idols (v.22) may suggest the people have come to see that a precious exterior masks a plain interior. The idols, so splendid in appearance, are worthless at all but a superficial level. The illustration stresses the repugnance with which they will now be viewed. Worship gives place to its antithesis.

Like so many of his compatriots, Isaiah is deeply attached to the soil of his

own land (v.23). This is based not simply in the patriot's natural affection for his native land, but in a theology of the land, for it is God's land, given by him to his people and from which he threatens to remove them as a consequence of their persistent sin. Deuteronomy has this as a major theme (e.g., Dt 1:8, 21 – 25, 34 – 40; 3:25 – 29; 6:10 – 11; 11:8 – 17; 28:62 – 68). The prophet often sees God's blessing, therefore, in terms of good agricultural weather, increased fruitfulness, and fat cattle (cf. Isa 4:2; 35:1 – 2; et al.). In the day of God's blessing on the land, even the working animals will live well above subsistence level (v.24).

The reference to "the day of great slaughter" and the fall of towers (v.25) seems strange in this context, but perhaps in much the same way that warnings of judgment occur in the midst of descriptions of ultimate divine blessing (Rev 21 – 22).The Bible is realistic and shows that God's future plan includes judgment for the rebel as well as blessing for the penitent. Young (in loc.) says, "If the reference is to defeat of the Assyrians (Drechsler, etc.) it would point forward to vv.27 ff. If it is to the downfall of the Judahites (Delitzsch, etc.) it looks back to vv.16 ff. and 29:20 ff." The former seems the more likely. The choice of the word "tower" is doubly appropriate, for it has military connotations but also suggests haughty pride (cf. 2:15).

In keeping with the general context, the prophet declares there will be abundant supplies of water from the mountains (v.25).Are the mountains therefore the source of this water, or do they themselves benefit from it? The modern town-dweller views hill country quite differently from the country farmer. The one sees its beauty, the other its agricultural barrenness.The language used here suggests the mountains themselves will enjoy the refreshing waters, with all their potential for fruitfulness.

This picture of nature, released from its present limiting conditions, is taken further still in v.26. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the prophecy has passed beyond anything as yet fulfilled and has located itself in God's eschatological purposes. Both the moon and the sun will be much brighter than at present. The number "seven" is not chosen arbitrarily, for the creation of sun and moon in Genesis 1 occurred in the context of a six-day creation, with divine rest on the seventh. It is as though the fullness of the divine creative energies is channeled to secure the greater radiance of the sun. The people have known severe chastisement from God through the Assyrians (cf. 1:5 – 9). Now his powers will secure healing where once he had smitten them in wrath (cf. also

40:2).

27 – 33 During the intertestamental period, Judaism — both in Palestine and in Alexandria — became somewhat embarrassed by OT anthropomorphisms, as though they presented a picture of God too much like the humanity he had created. Isaiah shows no such embarrassment. The vivid anthropomorphisms of Isaiah 40 contribute immensely to the impression that chapter gives us of a living God acting in a concrete situation on behalf of his people. Here, too, this kind of language, with its strong visual appeal, describes God, not now so much as the Redeemer of his people as the Judge of his enemies. Verse 31 identifies the condemned foe as Assyria.

The "Name of the LORD" (v.27) reveals him (Ex 3:13 – 15; 6:2 – 3). When his name is said to come from afar in judgment, the prophet may be alluding to Mount Sinai, where, in awesome splendor (Ex 19), God showed himself in all of his holiness to his people.

Verses 27 – 28 are exceptionally vivid, even for Isaiah, full of anthropomorphic language and employing four illustrations of the wrath of God. Fire, with all its power to terrify and to destroy, dominates v.27 (cf. 33:14). Hebrews 12:29 shows that under the new covenant this quality in God is still experienced and should lead us to worship him with reverential awe.

Fire is replaced by water in v.28. In 8:7 – 8 the prophet pictured the waters of the great Euphrates overflowing and reaching even to the neck of Judah. In this way God used Assyria to chastise his people. Now he will himself chastise Assyria, and he uses the same image. The sieve of judgment reveals the spiritual inadequacy of the unrighteous, much as the wind of the threshing floor distinguishes between the light and the heavy (29:5). The figure of the horse with a bit suggests God will take the arrogant sinner down the road that leads to his destruction.

Verse 29 may appear callous and harsh, but we must remember that God's judgments are often his means of salvation. Because Assyria is to be judged, Judah will enjoy God's deliverance. Young (in loc.) points out that the great festival in which there was a celebration night was the Passover (Ex 12:42). If there is an intended allusion to this here, the prophet may have expected his

hearers to draw the parallel between these two acts of salvation. Certainly it is a pilgrim feast he has in mind. For “the Rock of Israel,” see the comment at 26:4. Miscall, 80, notes that the poet closes the chapter with all-lusions to a variety of passages (e.g., 9:2 – 3; 10:5; 12:1 – 6; 17:10; 26:4) and then says, “This concentration of allusions serves to bind and unify the book of Isaiah.”

At certain times the heavens are loud with noise and are the source of God’s many demonstrations of his power in nature. Psalm 29 speaks of the voice of the Lord in language strongly reminiscent of a thunderstorm.That kind of language occurs here as well. In a thunderstorm there is much to be heard and seen. All this of course figuratively and vigorously presents the judgment of God. The consuming fire links vv.30 and 27. Amid all the noise of the storm, the Lord’s arm strikes his adversaries with many a forceful blow. Judah has been smitten through Assyria (1:3 – 9), but now the God who used Assyria will punish her (v.31; cf. 10:5 – 19).

Verse 32 has been found objectionable by some commentators; but this passage is not unique in Scripture, as Revelation 18 – 19 clearly shows. God’s people are here portrayed rejoicing at his judgment on sin because they must take his point of view on everything and because this judgment is at the same time their salvation.

Some places have become symbols of spiritual realities. Zion/Jerusalem is the people of God; Babylon, the world in arrogant opposition to God; and Ge-Hinnom (Gehenna) and Tophet, God’s judgment on sin. Tophet was in the Hinnom Valley, to the south of Jerusalem (Jer 7:31 – 32), and there apostate Jews offered their children by fire to the pagan deity Molech. Perhaps the prophet is saying that the king of Assyria himself must pay. He has dedicated himself to paganism, and now he will suffer for this in terrible judgment from God.

NOTES

1 לְנַסֵּךְ מַסֵּכָה (*linsōk massēkâ,* “forming an alliance”) is literally “pouring out a drink offering,” taken by many, but without clear evidence, to refer to a ritual associated with a covenant. The parallelism and the context together do seem to

require some such explanation.

2 For לָעוֹז (*lāʿôz*), from עָזַז (*ʿāzaz*, "to be strong"), we should probably read, with the LXX, by repointing *laʿûz* ("take refuge"), represented by the NIV's "look for help."

5 The NIV, NASB, et al. follow the Qere, *laʿûz*, "be put to shame"), instead of the Kethiv, הִבְאִישׁ (*hibʾîš*, "stink"). The LXX omits this completely.

9 Jensen, 112 – 20, helpfully explores the background and implications of the phrase תּוֹרַת יהוה (*tôrat**yhwh***, "the LORD's instruction").

19 The MT of this verse opens, "for a people in Zion shall dwell in Jerusalem." The LXX, Syriac, and Vulgate all presuppose some variation from this. The NIV, with most modern English versions, repoints יֵשֵׁב (*yēšēb*) as יֹשֵׁב (*yōšēb*) and translates, "O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem." This may well be correct, as it makes better sense and does not alter the consonantal text.

20 מוֹרֶיךָ (*môreykā*, "teachers") is a participle with a pronominal suffix and can be either plural or singular (cf. NASB, "Teacher"). Which is chosen doesn't matter much, because the Lord teaches his people through the prophets, who would be designated by the plural.

28 The words translated "rising up to the neck" include the verb מוֹרֶיךָ (*môreykā*, basically "to halve"), and all the versions have found them difficult. For a conspectus of translations, see N. H. Snaith (*Notes on the Hebrew Text of Isaiah XXVIII – XXXII* [London: Epworth, 1945], in loc.). נָפַת (*nāpat*) is a *hapax legomenon* apparently meaning "sieve."

D. Woe to Those Who Seek Help from Egypt (31:1 – 9)

1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
    who rely on horses,
who trust in the multitude of their chariots
    and in the great strength of their horsemen,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
    or seek help from the LORD.
2 Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster;
    he does not take back his words.
He will rise up against the house of the wicked,
    against those who help evildoers.
3 But the Egyptians are men and not God;
    their horses are flesh and not spirit.
When the LORD stretches out his hand,
    he who helps will stumble,
    he who is helped will fall;
    both will perish together.
4 This is what the LORD says to me:
"As a lion growls,
    a great lion over his prey —
and though a whole band of shepherds
    is called together against him,
he is not frightened by their shouts
    or disturbed by their clamor —
so the LORD Almighty will come down
    to do battle on Mount Zion and on its heights.
5 Like birds hovering overhead,
    the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem;
he will shield it and deliver it,
    he will 'pass over' it and will rescue it."
6 Return to him you have so greatly revolted against, O Israelites. 7 For in that day every one of you
    will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made.
8 "Assyria will fall by a sword that is not of man;
    a sword, not of mortals, will devour them.
They will flee before the sword
    and their young men will be put to forced labor.
9 Their stronghold will fall because of terror;
    at sight of the battle standard their commanders will panic,"
declares the LORD,
    whose fire is in Zion,
    whose furnace is in Jerusalem.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 Like chs. 28 – 30, ch. 31 commences with *hôy* (“woe”), but this chapter is not entirely threatening in nature, for it also contains divine promises. Hezekiah had repeated the sin of Ahaz in seeking an alliance with an alien power instead of encouraging his people to trust in the Lord (see the comments on chs. 7 – 8 and the Introduction, p. 437). In so doing he showed he had failed to learn from history (for Egypt had proved anything but an ally to Israel in the past), from Scripture (for any attempt to secure horses for cavalry units was against the divine constitution for the king; Dt 17:14 – 20), or even from the experience of his father, Ahaz, which could have provided him with a salutary warning.

For the possible implications of the phrase “go down to Egypt,” see the comments on 30:2. The Hebrew verb *ʿāzar* (“to help”) occurs four times in these verses, though the NIV translates a different verb (*dāraš*, “to seek, desire”) in the concluding line of v.1 as “seek help.” The decision to call for help from a particular source is in fact a value judgment, particularly when there are a number of options open. Judah is showing that, in terms of its protection, it has set greater value on Egypt, which the prophet has contemptuously described as “Rahab the Do-Nothing” (30:7), than on the living God. It was not reliance in the power of numbers that had won the great victory over Midian in the days of Joshua, the event Isaiah loved to recall as a paradigm of triumph through reliance on the Lord (see comments on 9:3 – 5; 10:24 – 27).

The statement “yet he too is wise” (v.2) is pregnant with sarcasm. False political wisdom rules in the courts of Judah. The so-called wise men themselves used sarcasm when speaking about the Lord’s wisdom (5:19; 29:15). The prophet’s conviction that divine wisdom will prove all vaunted human sagacity to be wrong is as strong as Paul’s conviction that God’s wisdom judges all that passes for wisdom among humans (1Co 1:18 – 3:23; see Whedbee, esp. ch. 4).

“Disaster” (v.2) is literally “evil” (*rāʿ*) and is, of course, a reference to war (cf. Am 3:6). This is made even more terrifying by the assertion that God does not retract such threats of judgment. Numbers 23:19 presents the same truth but in terms of blessing rather than of judgment. In v.2b “the house of the wicked” (cf. 1:4) is Judah, and “those who help evildoers” are the Egyptians, to whom they have appealed for military assistance.

Comparisons are particularly odious when made between things or people differing in quality. The greatest qualitative distinction exists between the all-sovereign Creator and the universe he originated and rules (v.3). To us "flesh" seems so substantial, for it is visible and tangible, while "spirit" may seem ethereal, partly because of the wide range of connotations that exist for that English word. Nothing can be further from biblical thinking, as passages such as Zechariah 4:6 and John 3:5 – 8 show. The invisible source of supernatural, almighty power in God totally outclasses the apparently strong but in reality (in comparative terms) almost infinitely weak "men and . . . horses."

The words "when the LORD stretches out his hand" (v.3) are ominous in reference to Egypt; for they have overtones of the exodus when all the power of that land was overcome by the Lord (Dt 4:34; 7:19), and Egypt at that time was a much more significant world power than in Isaiah's day. Putting Isaiah's thought in v.3b into a figure, the unequal yoke Judah is seeking with Egypt will mean that the fall of the one will bring disaster to the other also.

4 – 5 The interpretation of v.4 is much disputed; everything turns on the identification of the lion. Mauchline (in loc.), giving one of the two main interpretations, says, "The lion represents the Assyrians who have devastated Judah and are ready to devour Jerusalem; the shepherds are the Egyptians who have come to aid Judah and have succeeded only in making an ineffectual noise which has not deterred or troubled the Assyrians." O. Kaiser (in loc.), by contrast, expresses the alternative interpretation:

> The lion will not allow anyone to steal from him what belongs to him. This behavior is compared to Yahweh's descent from heaven to fight upon the hill of Zion . .. thus what Yahweh does and the behavior of the lion correspond. In other words, Yahweh does not allow anyone to steal from him what belongs to him. Jerusalem belongs to him because he has chosen it (cf. Ps 132:13f.) and therefore he will not allow it to fall into the hands of the attackers, whom we at once recognize as Assyria.

Amos, whose influence can be seen in Isaiah (see Introduction, p. 449), uses the lion figure both of God (Am 3:8) and Assyria, God's punitive agent (Am 3:12).The NIV sentence structure (its protasis-apodosis pattern) assumes the figure is intended to be understood in terms of God, and this reads the Hebrew most naturally. Oswalt (in loc.) has a helpful note at this point. No figure can be

pressed to its ultimate limit, and the apparent identification of Jerusalem as the Lord's "prey" that he protects need imply nothing as to his ultimate intention for it; for it is his protecting activity that is the point.

Verse 5 changes the figure but not the message, though it clarifies God's benign intent in relation to his people's capital city. Egypt can give no guarantee of Jerusalem's protection from the Assyrians, but God will make it his special care. Young (in loc.) says, "These two comparisons complement one another. First, God is compared with a strong lion, bold, unafraid, powerful; then with tender and loving birds which protect their nest. But can tender birds protect their nest? To support the latter comparison we have the first. He who protects is He who is strong as a lion to accomplish His purposes."

The closing line of v.5 recalls for us the exodus allusion in v.3, also perhaps the awesome vision in 4:5. The God of the exodus will protect his people in Jerusalem as he protected them in the wilderness by the pillar of cloud and fire (4:5) and in Egypt itself at the Passover. The single quotation marks in the NIV around "pass over" suggest this allusion, and this term is usually applied to the Passover (Ex 12:13, 23, 27; Nu 9:4; Jos 5:11; 2Ch 30:18). Facing Sennacherib and his great hosts, the people of Jerusalem are as safe as were their forebears in Egypt on Passover night, for the God who is planning a great slaughter of her enemies will once again protect her.

6 – 7 As chs. 36 – 37 will reveal, the Lord's deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib will be a singular demonstration of his reality and power, setting him apart from other deities. The gods of many nations have failed to protect their devotees from the Assyrians, but now the true God will show his supremacy even over the mighty gods of Assyria. There was idolatry among the people of Judah (v.7; cf. 2:8, 20); Isaiah calls them to repentance (v.6) in anticipation of that day when, because of God's singular act of deliverance, the worthlessness of all idols will be recognized. Idolatry is the deep revolt from which the prophet calls them to return, though of course it has many another manifestation, for ungodliness leads to wickedness (Ro 1:18).

8 – 9 Isaiah is concerned here that an analogy he has used should not be taken literally. "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon" (Jdg 7:20) was not a literal sword, and the Lord secured a great victory over Assyria by nonmilitary means

(see 37:36 – 37). Verse 8b seems to look beyond this to the ultimate destruction of Assyria by its foes.

Literally, “their stronghold” (v.9) is “their rock,” and the prophet seems to have in view the rocky site of an Assyrian fortress. The picture conveyed is that of a fortress city, perhaps one in Assyria’s heartland, approached by its enemies with their battle standards clearly visible. The sight is so unfamiliar to those used to constant military victory that the enemy’s task will be made easy by their demoralization. The description of God, however, takes us back swiftly to Jerusalem, for whose sake Assyria is being judged and whose temple and ever-burning altar fire symbolize God’s presence with it.

E. God's Kingdom and the Triumph of Righ teous ness (32:1 – 20)

OVERVIEW

This oracle interrupts the sequence of "woe" oracles that began at 28:1, which resumes and concludes with the prophecy that starts in 33:1 (see the general introduction to chs. 28 – 33). Its purpose here seems to be to encourage the reader to hope in God and the triumph of his kingdom purposes despite the fact that recent chapters have majored in God's judgment on his people. Of course, the concluding verses of ch. 31 have prepared somewhat for this.

Many critics reject the Isaianic authorship of vv.1 – 8, largely because they seem to owe so much to the wisdom tradition in Israel and so must be treated as nonprophetic and probably as late. Whed-bee, 16, however, asserts: "The recognition is growing that the relationship between wisdom and the prophets is much more complex than was formerly supposed. This is coupled with an increasing awareness that law, prophecy and wisdom are not self-contained, isolated categories, but are inter-related in various ways in the history of Israelite society." He gives documentation (25 – 26) for those who wish to follow up this matter, though he himself tends to regard this passage as post-Isaianic, but without giving reasons.

If, for the OT, David is the supreme psalmist — a fact much more widely recognized today than by nineteenth-century criticism — Solomon is the supreme wise man. If both the prophet and the wise man were influenced by the same Spirit and served the same divine ends, why separate their writings so rigidly? We have already seen evidence of the influence of the wisdom tradition on Isaiah (see comments at 26:7 – 11).

1 See, a king will reign in righteousness
and rulers will rule with justice.
2 Each man will be like a shelter from the wind
and a refuge from the storm,
like streams of water in the desert
and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.

3 Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed,
and the ears of those who hear will listen.
4 The mind of the rash will know and understand,
and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.
5 No longer will the fool be called noble
nor the scoundrel be highly respected.
6 For the fool speaks folly,
his mind is busy with evil:
He practices ungodliness
and spreads error concerning the LORD;
the hungry he leaves empty
and from the thirsty he withholds water.
7 The scoundrel's methods are wicked,
he makes up evil schemes
to destroy the poor with lies,
even when the plea of the needy is just.
8 But the noble man makes noble plans,
and by noble deeds he stands.
9 You women who are so complacent,
rise up and listen to me;
you daughters who feel secure,
hear what I have to say!
10 In little more than a year
you who feel secure will tremble;
the grape harvest will fail,
and the harvest of fruit will not come.
11 Tremble, you complacent women;
shudder, you daughters who feel secure!
Strip off your clothes,
put sackcloth around your waists.
12 Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields,
for the fruitful vines
13 and for the land of my people,
a land overgrown with thorns and briers —
yes, mourn for all houses of merriment
and for this city of revelry.
14 The fortress will be abandoned,
the noisy city deserted;
citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland forever,
the delight of donkeys, a pasture for flocks,
15 till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high,
and the desert becomes a fertile field,
and the fertile field seems like a forest.
16 Justice will dwell in the desert
and righteousness live in the fertile field.

17 The fruit of righteousness will be peace;
the effect of righteous ness will be quietness and confi dence forever.
18 My people will live in peaceful dwelling places,
in secure homes,
in undisturbed places of rest.
19 Though hail flattens the forest
and the city is leveled completely,
20 how blessed you will be,
sowing your seed by every stream,
and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Are these verses messianic, or do they picture an ideal government in which the whole administrative system of the country is in the hands of righteous people? The question makes a distinction without a real difference. Psalm 1 may not be messianic in the strict sense, but it presents a picture of ideal righteous ness never fully expressed until the coming of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the only explicit reference to the king is at the beginning of v.1 (but see comments at v.2), but the reader almost inevitably makes a link with the picture of the righteous messianic king in ch. 11. The book of Isaiah presents its messianic theme in such a way that there is development from one passage to the next, and this passage certainly figures as a development of ch. 11, the new emphasis being on the association of others with the king in his righteous reign.

Some writers maintain that the king here is Hezekiah, presented as a royal ideal figure. Seitz (in loc.), however, who holds this view, also maintains that "Isaiah 11:1 – 9 . . . speaks of an age yet to come." It is "prophecy that remained yet to be fulfilled, precisely because Isaiah was a prophet whom posterity knew the Lord had truly sent." If our passage here is a development of ch. 11, it is not easy to see how the present passage can refer to Hezekiah.

At the opening of ch. 31, the prophet criticized those in the royal court who looked to Egypt for help against the Assyrian menace. The king must bear special responsibility, but clearly the prophet has others at the court in mind as well (cf. 1:21 – 23, which gives a bleak picture of Jerusalem's rulers). The whole sinful scene of government will pass away, its place taken by a righ teous king supported by subordinates sharing his concern for righteous-ness and justice.

This association of others with a messianic figure is found also in Daniel 7:13 – 14, 18 and in many NT passages (e.g., Mt 19:28; 2Ti 2:12; Rev 20:4; the general interpretation of these passages is discussed in the Introduction, pp. 453 – 56).

Does v.2 refer to the king or to the king and princes together? The NIV seems to suggest the latter, with its translation “each man will be . . .” although it is general enough to allow for either interpretation. The parallelism of v.1 suggests an emphasis rather on good government than exclusively on the king himself, in contrast to ch. 11. It seems best, then, to treat v.2 as an expansion of v.1 as a whole, not simply of its first statement. Government, when righteous, affords protection from oppression. The various illustrations drawn from nature are self-explanatory. In the Messiah’s kingdom, both at the national and at the local level, righteousness will reign and fear of the oppressor will be over.

3 – 7 Isaiah was warned at his call that he would see people shutting their eyes and ears to the truth he proclaimed (6:9 – 10).When the messianic kingdom comes, this spiritual insensitivity will end (v.3). Those who should have had minds clarified by the bright shining of divine truth were in fact befuddled by drink (28:7 – 10) and had stammered out rash things instead of prophetic truth. This situation, too, is to be rectified (v.4). It is perhaps significant that Paul, where he quotes Isaiah 28:11, also says, “Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?” (1Co 14:9, 21).

If leaders are blind, their people often share this blindness. A nation gets the leaders it deserves (cf. 3:4 – 7). The moral sense was so warped in Judah, as 5:20 shows, that there was failure to recognize the true nature of those in positions of leadership. This, too, will change in the Messiah’s kingdom. In v.5 the prophet speaks of the fool and the scoundrel; in vv.6 – 7 he describes each. In the OT folly often has overtones of godlessness (e.g., Ps 14), and so it has here. If the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps 111:10; cf. Pr 1:7), then the godless man must be pursuing the wrong way.

Verse 6 presents an appalling picture of a man whose mind is controlled by evil, so that both his own life and his influence with others are evil. The messianic king demonstrates his godly righ teous-ness by his concern for the poor and needy (11:4). The godless fool is utterly unconcerned for their most elementary needs (cf. 58:7).

The prophet next speaks of “the scoundrel” (v.7), who, if not the same person, is even worse. He stoops to lies and deceit to deprive the poor man of his rights at law. Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) describes him as somebody on the make, a mixture of swindler and social climber. In fact, he is the very man from whom the messianic king will protect the poor (11:4 – 5). Conduct reveals character (v.8), and this is true both of the noble man, whose day will come in the messianic kingdom, and the scoundrel, who will not enter that kingdom but will face God’s judgment.

9 – 14 In ch. 3, Isaiah moved from condemning Judah’s leaders to strong criticism of the women (v.9). This suggests that certain aristocratic women were exercising an unhelpful influence over their husbands, so they must share their judgment. Many an Ananias and Sapphira must face judgment together for complicity in the same sins. In this passage the stress falls on complacency, probably targeting the court’s pro-Egyptian policy. The women, too, are relying on Egyptian help for the security of Jerusalem, and so of their homes.

Isaiah does contain some prophecies with timed fulfillments (e.g., 7:8, 16).This present prophecy was probably uttered a year or so prior to Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah, which led to the situation depicted in ch. 1. There it is clear that both the country and the cities experienced devastation. It is probably the effects of such an invasion the prophet has in view here rather than a simple harvest failure (v.10). So its failure is due to the inability of the people, because of conditions of enemy occupation, to gather the vintage and other ripe fruit. The women are called to mourning (vv.11 – 12). It is not their husbands or sons who are dead but their land, but this produces some of the effects of widowhood; poverty and malnutrition must surely be their lot.

Isaiah often speaks of “thorns and briers” (v.13; see comment on 9:18). This also points to enemy occupation rather than mere harvest failure, for the latter would not account for the generally unkempt condition of the countryside. There is a certain emotional quality attached to the phrase “my people” (cf. 1:3). How sad that the land of God’s people — a chosen land for a chosen people — should be reduced to such a lamentable condition! It is, of course, their sin that has caused this.

Do vv.13b – 14 refer to the same act of judgment through the Assyrians, or do they go beyond this, describing perhaps the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem and its results? The word *kî* (“yes”) in v.13 has intensive force, suggesting that what follows goes beyond what has already been stated.This may simply indicate that a judgment on dwelling places is felt more immediately, so more forcibly, than one on farmland and vineyards, but it may also indicate a later, more intense phase of the divine program of judgment. The latter seems more probable, because the language of these two verses, while employing the singular, suggests that Jerusalem rather than the cities of Judah is in view (see Notes). The devastation caused by Sennacherib’s wind will be completed by Nebuchadnezzar’s whirlwind.

15 – 20 The description of judgment suddenly changes to one of blessing. The contrast is particularly impressive because of the intentionally illogical words, “a wasteland forever . . . till” (vv.14 – 15)! Such a decisive assertion of judgment can only be canceled by an equally decisive manifestation of grace.The condemnation of humans is undoubtedly “forever” because death ushers in their judgment and its eternal consequences; but this condemnation can be canceled by the marvel of justifying grace through faith in Christ.

The reference to the Spirit (v.15) is most appropriate. If ch. 32 amplifies certain aspects of the messianic prophecy in ch. 11 (see comment on vv.1 – 2), we might expect some reference to the Spirit, who has such a place of importance in the earlier chapter. The idyllic picture there is echoed here, but it is particularly significant that the righteous king in v.1 is accompanied by righteous subordinates. This suggests a wider ministry of the Spirit not confined simply to the Messiah himself. This is exactly what is now described.

The NT brings together the OT teaching that both the Messiah and his people will know the endowment of the Spirit of God. Here we see an implicit link in Isaiah’s own thought. The language of outpouring (v.15) is destined to be far-reaching, being taken up again by Joel (assuming that Joel is later than Isaiah) in Joel 2:28 and then, of course, in Acts 2:17 – 21. As Young (in loc.) puts it:

> Then there will occur a reversal of the present condition, a renewal that is indeed revolutionary, the very opposite of the condition described in 29:10. No longer will a spirit of sleep be poured out upon the people, but the Spirit from on high, the Spirit that is to be contrasted with mere flesh (31:3), the Spirit who brings rich gifts. . . . It is God’s creative Spirit who brings about what amounts to a new

creation.

The Introduction (pp. 451 – 52) discusses whether passages such as these should be understood literally or spiritually. There are both literal and figurative dimensions to Isaiah's use of agricultural language. Here, however, a literal interpretation seems the more appropriate, for the judgment that the blessing reverses is certainly physical. Verse 15b should be compared with 29:17. Clements (in loc.) says, "Throughout verses 15 – 20 there appears to be an intentional sequence established: prosperity-justice-peace-happiness." He also says, "Prosperity without justice is a worthless acquisition." The close relationship between righteous ness and peace is parallel to that seen in 11:4 – 9.

In discussing v.13 we noted the emotional quality of the phrase "my people," and this may be seen again in v.18. In the former verse God's people experience his hand of judgment on them, his strange work (28:21); but now he can bestow the blessing that is in his heart for them as his own beloved people. This verse, with its sequence of prepositional phrases, gives emphatic expression to God's promise that he will bring them, through righ teousness, into "quietness and confidence for ever" (v.17).

Verse 19 has been understood in three different ways. The NASB translation is similar in tone, though not in wording, to the TEV, which puts the verse in brackets. This reveals the translators' awareness that, so understood, it does not seem to fit the immediate context very well. The NEB, by contrast, renders it quite differently: "it will be cool on the slopes of the forest then, and cities shall lie peaceful in the plain." The NIV, understanding it along lines suggested by Kissane (in loc.), translates, "though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely." Each translation is possible; but the NIV makes it, with v.20, a fitting conclusion to the oracle, summing up its two elements of coming judgment and ultimate blessing.

Verse 20 takes up from 30:23 – 26 the picture of a plentiful economy based on abundant supplies of water but presents it in an even more desirable form. The amount of produce given by the soil will be so great that the farmer can allow his working animals to browse in the fields rather than feeding them with prepared foodstuffs in their stalls.

NOTES

1 הֵן (*hēn*) is usually translated “see” (NIV) or “behold” (NASB), but Kissane (in loc.) and Watts (in loc.) propose to read it as hypothetical, which is not impossible. So Watts translates this verse, “Suppose a king should reign with righteousness and likewise princes should rule with justice.” But this seems unlikely, for it combines a comparatively rare sense for a word with a supposition, a type of sentence hardly characteristic of OT prophecy.

10 The NIV’s “in little more than a year” translates יָמִים עַל־שָׁנָה (*yāmîm ʿal-šānâ*), literally, “days on a year” or “days over a year,” suggesting either a year or a little more.

12 The NIV’s “beat” is in line with the imperatival form in lQIsa, whereas the MT has a difficult masculine participle. For other problems in vv.11 – 12, see Motyer (1993, 260, n.2).

14 עֹפֶל (*ʿōpel*) and בַּחַן (*baḥan*), translated “citadel” and “watchtower” in the NIV, may be place names. If so, a reference to Jerusalem is established, for Ophel was on Jerusalem’s southern edge. See Young (in loc.), who also brings out the extensive wordplay that this chapter contains.

F. Woe to the Destroyer (33:1 – 24)

OVERVIEW

This oracle is the last in a series of five, interrupted only by the messianic oracle in ch. 32 (see general introduction to chs. 28 – 33). It is the only one in which the introductory "woe" is directed against a foreign power rather than God's people.

Commentators show much interest in the chapter's structure. The school of OT scholarship that goes back through Mowinckel to Gunkel, emphasizing the cult, has identified the chapter as a prophetic liturgy (see esp. G. Fohrer, *Das Buch Jesaya*, Band II [Zurich – Stuttgart: Zwingli, 1962], in loc., and H. Gunkel, "Jesaia 33, eine prophetische Liturgie," *ZAW* 42 [1924]: 177 – 208). The theory is interesting and can be made out plausibly, but it is somewhat speculative. As Blenkinsopp (in loc.) says, "the obvious problem was and is that we have no idea what a prophetic liturgy was like or even whether such a liturgy ever existed." We will not therefore assume that the chapter is actually cast into this form. Certainly all the material appears to represent an integrated whole. There can be little doubt that its theme is the Assyrian threat to Jerusalem and their departure from it (cf. chs. 36 – 37).

1 Woe to you, O destroyer,
    you who have not been destroyed!
Woe to you, O traitor,
    you who have not been betrayed!
When you stop destroying,
    you will be destroyed;
when you stop betraying,
    you will be betrayed.
2 O LORD, be gracious to us;
    we long for you.
Be our strength every morning,
    our salvation in time of distress.
3 At the thunder of your voice, the peoples flee;
    when you rise up, the nations scatter.
4 Your plunder, O nations, is harvested as by young locusts;

like a swarm of locusts men pounce on it.
5 The LORD is exalted, for he dwells on high;
he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness.
6 He will be the sure foundation for your times,
a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge;
the fear of the LORD is the key to this treasure.
7 Look, their brave men cry aloud in the streets;
the envoys of peace weep bitterly.
8 The highways are deserted,
no travelers are on the roads.
The treaty is broken,
its witnesses are despised,
no one is respected.
9 The land mourns and wastes away,
Lebanon is ashamed and withers;
Sharon is like the Arabah,
and Bashan and Carmel drop their leaves.
10 “Now will I arise,” says the LORD.
“Now will I be exalted;
now will I be lifted up.
11 You conceive chaff,
you give birth to straw;
your breath is a fire that consumes you.
12 The peoples will be burned as if to lime;
like cut thornbushes they will be set ablaze.”
13 You who are far away, hear what I have done;
you who are near, acknowledge my power!
14 The sinners in Zion are terrified;
trembling grips the godless:
“Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?
Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?”
15 He who walks righteously
and speaks what is right,
who rejects gain from extortion
and keeps his hand from accepting bribes,
who stops his ears against plots of murder
and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil —
16 this is the man who will dwell on the heights,
whose refuge will be the mountain fortress.
His bread will be supplied,
and water will not fail him.
17 Your eyes will see the king in his beauty
and view a land that stretches afar.
18 In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror:
“Where is that chief officer?

Where is the one who took the revenue?
Where is the offi cer in charge of the towers?”
19 You will see those arrogant people no more,
those people of an obscure speech,
with their strange, incomprehensible tongue.
20 Look upon Zion, the city of our festivals;
your eyes will see Jerusalem,
a peaceful abode, a tent that will not be moved;
its stakes will never be pulled up,
nor any of its ropes broken.
21 There the LORD will be our Mighty One.
It will be like a place of broad rivers and streams.
No galley with oars will ride them,
no mighty ship will sail them.
22 For the LORD is our judge,
the LORD is our lawgiver,
the LORD is our king;
it is he who will save us.
23 Your rigging hangs loose:
The mast is not held secure,
the sail is not spread.
Then an abundance of spoils will be divided
and even the lame will carry off plunder.
24 No one living in Zion will say, “I am ill”;
and the sins of those who dwell there will be forgiven.

COMMENTARY

1 It looks as though v.1a takes up the boasts of the Assyrians, who have been all-victorious for so long. Verse 1b declares they will be caught in their own trap. Such treatment should be particularly effective in bringing home a sense of guilt to the sinner.

2 – 4 The people in the city at last realize their total dependence on the Lord.These words are best understood as their prayer with the Assyrian army at the gate. In 30:18 – 19, the prophet stated that their God would hear them in grace when they called out to him: “How gracious he will be when you cry for help!” We now see his words beginning to bear fruit. This must have been encouraging after so many years of unresponsiveness.

Verse 2 has points of similarity to the eschatological song in ch. 12 (esp. 12:1

– 2).Verse 3 expresses general confidence in the Lord, possibly echoing Psalm 68:1. Young (in loc.) makes an apt comment on v.4: “Although the prophecy may be taken as the statement of a general truth, namely, that when the enemy has served its purpose, God will intervene and deprive it of its power, one cannot help thinking of the sudden departure of Sennacherib from the land.” Joel 1:1 – 2:11 points up the appropriateness of the image of locusts used here.

5 – 6 Isaiah often uses the language of exaltation and debasement (see comment on 2:2 – 4). He believes the Lord alone is fit to be exalted to the highest place, and in ch. 2 he depicted this great God as at last given his rightful place when everything that challenges his supremacy has been debased. Here he presents the complementary truth that the Lord is exalted already (v.5). Eschatological judgment, such as ch. 2 presents, is therefore simply the demonstration in history of that exaltation, which, although challenged, is actually beyond challenge.

This gloriously transcendent God is immanent among his people.There may well be a connection with 32:15 – 17, where Isaiah prophesied that the Spirit of God would be poured out on the people “from on high,”suggesting that God’s exalted throne is the source from which his justice and righ teous-ness will be poured out on his people through the ministry of his Spirit. According to 1:21 (cf. also 1:26), this will restore to the city a concern for justice that she knew in an earlier day, perhaps under the rule of David (see comments on ch. 1).

In v.6 we find *multum in parvo*, for it is “a rich store,” so partaking of the nature of the God who speaks it to the people through his prophet. The major issue in recent chapters (esp. chs. 30 – 31) has been political security. If the Assyrian officers are below the city walls at the time of this oracle, with all hope of relief from Egypt gone, the prophet’s words are particularly significant. The fact that the words “a rich store of salvation and wisdom and knowledge” are in apposition to “the sure foundation” shows that to the prophet the Lord is all his people need.

This passage is strongly reminiscent of 1 Corin-thi ans 1:30 and Colossians 2:2 – 3, in which these blessings in all their riches are made available to God’s people in Christ. In the historical context here, the chief thought seems to be that the Lord himself is more than enough to give the people protection from their

enemies and wisdom in living as God's people in the international world.

Another link with the wisdom tradition (cf. Ps 111:10; Pr 1:7) is the assertion that this rich store becomes available through "the fear of the LORD," reminding us of the association of the fear of the Lord with the messianic king (11:2, 3). The word "fear" may also have been chosen because of the historical situation. The people trusted Egypt and feared Assyria; God is to be their fear just as the reference to a sure foundation suggests he too should be their trust.

7 – 9 Verse 7 introduces a striking contrast, for the prophet focuses attention on the sorry condition of Jerusalem, which has led the people eventually to call on their God in penitent faith. Terror grips the hearts of the warriors within the city gates.Those who have been sent out to parley with the enemy return weeping, for their words will not penetrate his hard heart. All normal commerce between communities comes to a halt (v.8; cf. Jdg 5:6), and the treaty that apparently existed between Sennacherib and Hezekiah is treated as null and void. The excavations in Hittite territory have confirmed the importance of treaties in the international Near-Eastern community in OT times.

The whole land is in mourning (v.9).The northern kingdom felt the heavy tread of the conqueror's feet; and the places named suggest that, apart from divine intervention, Judah will go the same way. If the withering of Lebanon refers to its trees, this is clearly an indication that what happened is a divine judgment; for its slopes were covered mostly by evergreens, whose leaves do not normally wither. Sharon was one of the most fertile parts of Palestine, while the Arabah was dry and arid. O. Kaiser (in loc.) points out that the references to Bashan in Transjordan and Carmel on the western coast suggest the scale of the enemy advance, extending across the whole country. The prophet surveys places farther north and sees the devastation — an earnest of what faces Jerusalem if the Assyrians gain entrance.

10 – 12 The threefold "now" (v.10) is most reassuring and is particularly impressive in the Hebrew; for the word translated "now" (<*attâ*) is forceful — almost explosive — in its sound (see also comments on 43:1 and 44:1). Isaiah has a sensitive feeling for the sound of words as well as their meaning, and the Spirit puts this to good use. The threefold assertion of God's exaltation reminds us also of the thrice-exalted Servant of the Lord in 52:13 (see comments on v.5).

The enemy's plan to take Jerusalem will come to nothing, and the prophet uses the figure of a pregnancy in such a way as to bring home its futility (v.11; cf. 26:17 – 18). Their destruction will in fact be self-induced, being the result of their sinful antagonism toward God's people. In v.12 it looks as though the prophet has moved from the particular to the general, making a point about the comprehensiveness of judgment when it falls on the world's nations. In fact, the remainder of the chapter has an eschatological perspective combined with contemporary ethical application.

13 – 16 The judgments of God should have a salutary effect on his people, for they underscore his holiness and the impossibility of sinning with impunity. God speaks, in fact, to the whole world, calling on people to learn from the object lesson provided by his judgment of Assyria. The terms "far away" and "near" (v.13) describe the Gentile nations and Judah respectively (cf. 49:1; 57:19; Ac 2:39; Eph 2:13, 17).The call in these terms reminds us of God's call to the far-off heavens and the earth with which Isaiah's recorded prophecies commence (Isa 1:2). God's acts reveal his attributes, in this case his power.

The phrase "the sinners in Zion" (v.14) jars the spirit, for such a situation should not exist. Zion is God's city, where there is a concentration of the OT means of grace. This is surely no place for the godless, yet in every age the godless live cheek to jowl with the godly, contemptuous of the things of God that make their presence felt every day.

As this passage develops (v.15), it inevitably reminds us of Psalms 15 and 24, which show the conditions God has laid down for dwelling on his holy hill. The effects of great judgments may have some kinship with those of spiritual revival, for a new sense of God — his power and his holiness — overtakes the sinners in Zion. Like those who heard Peter at Pentecost, these people, cut to the heart, cry out in their conviction of sin (cf. Ac 2:37). The "consuming fire" (v.14) is not hell; it is God (cf. Heb 12:29)! Yet in a sense we may say that those who mistakenly interpret it as hell are not really so wide of the mark. Speaking earlier of judgment the prophet said, "The Light of Israel will become a fire, their Holy One a flame; in a single day it will burn and consume his thorns and his briers" (10:17).

The cry of the convicted in v.14 seems to require a negative answer, that no human being can dwell in the presence of such a holy God.Yet the prophet gives his hearers a wonderfully positive reply (v.15). Time and again he has called his people to faith in God. To find security through the fear of the Lord is to have the key to great spiritual treasure, including that practical wisdom that indicates the way the individual should walk, as well as the right approach to international politics for the leaders (cf. v.6).This strongly ethical passage reminds us of 58:6 – 12 and should be compared also with 32:3 – 8.

The book of Isaiah, in common with much of Scripture, shows a deep concern about sins of speech (cf. esp. 6:5 – 7). The man of God will neither speak evil nor listen to it from the lips of others (v.15). The final line of v.15 underlines the importance of fleeing from temptation. Verse 16, in its context, promises security and provision to the one who thus dwells with God and walks in righteous ness.

17 – 20 If we are correct that this prophecy is uttered by Isaiah as the Assyrian army threatens Jerusalem, these words will be immensely reassuring to the beleaguered people. Commentators seeking to identify the king of v.17 are divided into two groups, for it is hardly possible the prophet means Hezekiah. The king is either the Messiah or God himself. Young and O. Kaiser (both in loc.) present the main evidence, the former arguing that the king is the Messiah while the latter inclines to the alternative interpretation. Good arguments may be advanced on either side, but considerations of poetic structure particularly convince me that the prophet is speaking messianically.Viewing the land is somehow complementary to seeing the king, and the greatness of the Messiah's earthly dominion is asserted in earlier passages (e.g., 9:7; 11:9 – 10; cf. 26:15). In contrast to this embattled city — the only free territory left to God's people — the future king will appear as ruler over a wide empire.

The contrast between v.17 and 52:14 – 53:2 is striking, especially in the light of the threefold exaltation of the Servant in 52:13. Kingship for the messianic Servant of the Lord comes to its full realization only through his suffering and death.

Isaiah graphically pictures the people in the Messiah's days reflecting on the past and contrasting their lot then with the blessings they now have (v.18). They had been the people of a king who had paid tribute to Sennacherib in attempting

to buy him off (2Ki 18:13 – 16); and Assyrian officials had been seen in the streets of Jerusalem, the financial agents of an avaricious tyrant, no doubt with arrogant mien and gait to match. The earlier prophecy had proved true. God had spoken to this people in judgment through men of strange speech (v.19; cf. 28:11).

In the future, however, all this will be a thing of the past, subject still to vivid mental recall but no longer experienced. The emphasis on sight, whether physical or mental, which has characterized the last few verses, continues. Those exhorted to see the king and the wide land of his domain are now called to view his capital city (v.20), which is also the cultic center of the nation, where its joy in God find corporate expression at festival time. The enemies will be gone and peace will reign.

The name “Jerusalem,” whatever its full meaning, certainly includes “peace.” It possessed many fine buildings, but its people belonged to a race formerly nomadic, as the illustration of the tent firmly fixed reminds us. Verse 20 is probably the basis for a further use of the same analogy in 54:2 – 3, with its vision of a greatly enlarged tent recalling the far-stretching land of v.17 here.

21 – 22 One of the chief arguments used by those who understand the king of v.17 to be God himself is that the same word is expressly used of him in v.22. This is true, but the book of Isaiah has earlier moved swiftly from a vision of the heavenly King in ch. 6 to predictions of the coming messianic king in chs. 7 – 11. Here the sequence is reversed, and the two are brought into even closer literary proximity; but the earlier chapters have prepared us somewhat for this, especially in disclosing that the Messiah is himself divine.

This chapter, so full of compelling imagery, presents a picture of Jerusalem as a kind of Near-Eastern Venice or Amsterdam (v.21) or, in its historical context, like the great cities of Egypt or Mesopotamia. Most great civilizations have grown up around important rivers. Israel in general and Jerusalem in particular were exceptions to this. Indeed, Isaiah remembered the concern for adequate water supplies in the mind of Ahaz when he confronted him on a memorable occasion in the past (7:3).The city will now be amply supplied (cf. Ps 46:4).

Just as the prophet hastened to guard against possible misconception of his

imagery once before (see comment on 31:8), so now he makes it clear that such broad rivers will be an unmitigated blessing. Many a city, formerly glad of the advantages of its situation on a great river, has cursed this when that same river brought an enemy armada into the very heart of it. Gates may keep out an enemy that a waterway may admit. Mighty ships cannot challenge the mighty God (cf. 2:16); the same adjective is used of both.

Verse 21 began with an assertion about the Lord before moving to statements about Jerusalem.What Jerusalem is depends entirely on what Jerusalem's God is, and this is amplified in v.22. Each of the three brief, impressive statements about God places emphasis on the divine name by its structure. These three recall different periods in Israel's history, for the period of the judges was preceded by that of Moses the lawgiver and succeeded by that of the king. All three were savior figures, agents of God to bring deliverance to his people. Their God will now sum up all these functions in himself. How great then will be his salvation! The verse is reminiscent of the way so many functions — discrete and distributed among many human figures in OT days — meet in the NT presentation of Jesus Christ.The introductory word "for" (*kî*) is important, linking a result (peace) with its cause (the presence of the Lord).

23 – 24 Verse 23 takes up again the ship imagery from v.21, but who is being addressed? Although Drechsler, followed by Young and Clements, argues for Jerusalem,Assyria seems to fit the context better. If a "mighty ship" (v.21) was feared in Isaiah's day, it was Assyria. Let this ship sail belligerently in Jerusalem's direction and its essential instability — making it vulnerable to its foes — will stand revealed. Assyria appeared to be anything but vulnerable, so the prophet shows God-given insight. Only God and God's prophet can penetrate the military facade to the true condition of Assyria. When it falls, its empire will be evenly divided; and even apparently impotent states will find themselves enriched from its plunder.

Verse 24 shows that the whole passage describes the future blessedness of Jerusalem. God's blessings will be both physical and spiritual. In Psalm 103:3, the greater blessing of forgiveness comes first, for the psalm is only just beginning; here it is at the end, to climax the whole chapter. In Hebrews 10:17 – 18 the long, full exposition of Christ's priestly and sacrificial work that began at 7:1 comes to its triumphant conclusion in the statement that sin has been forgiven. No blessing is greater, none more urgently needed.

NOTES

1 We have assumed the destroyer here is Assyria, but some comentators take it — often on critical presuppositions that deny the chapter, or even parts of it, to Isaiah — to be Babylon, which is not impossible even if we accept Isaiah's authorship.The fact that the destroyer's identity is assumed rather than stated makes it seem more likely, however, that it is the well-known destroyer of the prophet's own day, viz., Assyria.

7 אֶרְאֶלָּם (*ʾerʾellām*, translated "brave men") is of uncertain meaning. HALOT (s.v.) gives three possibili-ties: "heroes," "priests," "inhabitants." The parallelism makes the first two more likely than the third, but we cannot be sure.

8 The NIV, following lQIsa, reads עֵדִים (*ʿēdîm*, "witnesses") instead of the MT's עָרִים (*ʿārîm*, "cities"), which is represented in the NASB. Either makes good sense, but the former establishes identical parallelism as the sense-structure of the whole verse.

14 Clements (in loc. and also in *God and Temple: The Idea of the Divine Presence in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965], 73ff.), following Gunkel ("Jesaia 33, eine prophetische Liturgie," *ZAW* 42 [1924]: 177ff.), maintains that vv.14 – 16 here follow, like Psalms 15:2 – 5; 24:4, the pattern of a Torah liturgy. Clements states:

> The form is based on a question-and-answer pattern used between pilgrims seeking entrance to the temple and the priestly response to this. This response sets out, in a tightly stylized way, the qualities of life of those who would worship Yahweh. Here the prophet has adapted the pattern to deal with the question of the *sinners in Zion*. (emphasis his)

Such exegesis is interesting, but Jensen, 25 – 26, has raised questions about the whole thesis, making special mention of passages such as the present one.

18 G. R. Driver ("Isaiah 1 – 39: Textual and Linguistic Problems," *JSS* 13 [1968]: 53) takes מִגְדָּלִים (*mig- dālîm*, "towers") to mean "piles" or "storechests,"

which would clarify the point of the reference.

V. God's Purposes of Judgment and Salvation (34:1 – 35:10)

OVERVIEW

The structure of Isaiah fascinates an increasing number of scholars (see Introduction, pp. 459 – 62), and there is much interest in the structural function of these two chapters. C. C. Torrey (*The Second Isaiah* [New York: Scribner's], 1928) thought they were originally the introduction to Isaiah 40 – 66 and, since the discovery of 1QIsa, there is interest in the gap between chs. 33 and 34. Oswalt (in loc.) regards them as the climax of the book's teaching about God's sovereignty over the nations found in chs. 13 – 35. Others divide chs. 13 – 35 into two main divisions, each divided again, so that chs. 24 – 27 form the climax to chs. 13 – 23 and our present two chapters the climax to chs. 28 – 33. So, it is pointed out, the picture the prophet has drawn of Israel's future in ch. 35 may be compared with statements of blessing for her given in chs. 28 – 33.

Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) makes no real division between these chapters and those immediately preceding them. He treats the references to "woe" in 28:1; 29:1, l5; 30:1; 31:1; and 33:1 as important structural markers in chs. 28 – 35 (see his general introduction to these chapters), and he views these two chapters as continuing the sixth woe.

Miscall, in his special "reader-response" study of chs. 34 – 35, argues for their special relationship to each other. He sees them as a discrete section of the book, but also as having their own special place in its overall structure. Especially he views them as one poem with contrasting scenes, or, using photographic imagery (89), with one as the negative and the other as the positive. We will follow him in this.

His use of Freudian categories, even though this is cautious (esp. 46 – 47), may seem inappropriate in handling the results of divine inspiration. Also we may find his postmodern tendency to interpret the chapters openly somewhat

excessive. He refers to “my expansive mode of reading that can note and display possibilities without having to argue for or against a particular application” (33).

Nevertheless, there are valuable insights in Miscall’s work that do not depend on these approaches. He points out, for example (36), that there is no reference to the moral causes of God’s anger with the world and with Edom, nor to the causes of his blessing, which is so evident in ch. 35. “The poet describes events and resulting states with little space given to divine reasons or motives.” He (39) criticizes Wildberger (in loc.) for reading into the passage what is not there when he says, “Yahweh certainly has reason to be angry, but the writer says nothing about it in contrast to 24:1ff. For him the weight of guilt is so heavy that he would consider it superfluous to say anything about it.” Surely, though, this is a justifiable reading of the passage in its wider context of the book of Isaiah as a whole.

A. Judgment on the World — and Edom (34:1 – 17)

OVERVIEW

This chapter is remarkable for its combination of the general and the particular, the universal and the local. It reminds us of the Greek word *hekastos* (“each one individually”) used in so many descriptions of judgment in the NT.

1 Come near, you nations, and listen;
pay attention, you peoples!
Let the earth hear, and all that is in it,
the world, and all that comes out of it!
2 The LORD is angry with all nations;
his wrath is upon all their armies.
He will totally destroy them,
he will give them over to slaughter.
3 Their slain will be thrown out,
their dead bodies will send up a stench;
the mountains will be soaked with their blood.
4 All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved
and the sky rolled up like a scroll;
all the starry host will fall
like withered leaves from the vine,
like shriveled figs from the fig tree.
5 My sword has drunk its fi ll in the heavens;
see, it descends in judgment on Edom,
the people I have totally destroyed.
6 The sword of the LORD is bathed in blood,
it is covered with fat —
the blood of lambs and goats,
fat from the kidneys of rams.
For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah
and a great slaughter in Edom.
7 And the wild oxen will fall with them,
the bull calves and the great bulls.
Their land will be drenched with blood,
and the dust will be soaked with fat.
8 For the LORD has a day of vengeance,
a year of retribution, to uphold Zion’s cause.
9 Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch,

her dust into burning sulfur;
her land will become blazing pitch!
10 It will not be quenched night and day;
its smoke will rise forever.
From generation to generation it will lie desolate;
no one will ever pass through it again.
11 The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
the great owl and the raven will nest there.
God will stretch out over Edom
the measuring line of chaos
and the plumb line of desolation.
12 Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom,
all her princes will vanish away.
13 Thorns will overrun her citadels,
nettles and brambles her strongholds.
She will become a haunt for jackals,
a home for owls.
14 Desert creatures will meet with hyenas,
and wild goats will bleat to each other;
there the night creatures will also repose
and find for themselves places of rest.
15 The owl will nest there and lay eggs,
she will hatch them, and care for her young under the shadow of her wings;
there also the falcons will gather,
each with its mate.
16 Look in the scroll of the LORD and read:
None of these will be missing,
not one will lack her mate.
For it is his mouth that has given the order,
and his Spirit will gather them together.
17 He allots their portions;
his hand distributes them by measure.
They will possess it forever
and dwell there from generation to generation.

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 Isaiah dramatically apostrophizes the nations of the world here. They cannot hear him, for, presumably, he is speaking in Jerusalem; but his message in fact concerns all of them. Such a dramatic apostrophe, addressed to the heavens and the earth, opened the book of his prophecies (1:2). He accumulates words and phrases — “you nations,” “you peoples,” “earth,” “world”— to emphasize the universal scope of his words. This makes the later, particular reference to one

small state all the more striking.

Such a dramatic address leads us to expect that it will introduce statements not simply about the nations themselves but about the sovereign God who addresses them, and this is what we find.There is to be a great judgment that will manifest God's anger with them (v.2; cf. Ro 1:18 – 2:11). It is significant that the prophet refers to the armies of the nations, for national arrogance and cruelty so often find their focus in aggressive acts by military forces. Israel has been on the receiving end of many such attacks, but divine retribution is coming. Amos, Isaiah's older contemporary, proclaimed God's judgment on all acts of inhumanity by one nation toward another, whether or not Israel or Judah was involved (see Am 1 – 2 and the Introduction, p. 449).

If the fearsome description in v.3, in which the reader is encouraged to hear, see, and also smell (see Miscall, 32), seems nauseating, then it has achieved its purpose of driving home the point that God's wrath will lead to the death of his enemies.

Verse 4 transports us from earth to the heavens. The ultimate character of this judgment is made clear when we see that it encompasses the entire cosmos, a reminder of 24:21 – 23. This kind of language is taken up by the apocalyptic passages of the NT (e.g., Mt 24:29; 2Pe 3:10; esp. Rev 6:13 – 14). There could be a glance also at God's judgment on the worship of the stars so prevalent in Babylon and familiar to the people of Judah at times of religious apostasy.

The way Isaiah illustrates cosmic judgment from situations familiar to his readers (i.e., from the life cycles of the fig tree and vine) heightens the impression of God's absolute control over all things (cf. 40:12). Miscall, 42 – 43, points out that Isaiah uses around a hundred terms related to plant life, some of which occur only once in the OT: "Within the book of Isaiah, vegetal imagery occurs in virtually every chapter with the characteristic balance or tension between regularity and diversity."

5 – 7 What a contrast there is here! God is the universal Judge, his judgments on the grand scale including even the very heavens (v.5). Then, with great suddenness, the sword of judgment falls on one of the smallest states in the biblical world, Edom. Edom was a traditional enemy of Israel, and so the

judgment here probably represents God's judgment on all of his people's foes.

Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) outlines the history of relations between Israel/Judah and Edom and argues persuasively that there is no need to treat every reference to Edomite opposition as postdating their activity after Jerusalem's fall in 586 BC, so there is no problem in seeing this oracle as Isaianic. In terms of Isaiah's own day, Edom had appropriated territory from Judah during the reign of Ahaz (2Ki 16:6). The prophecies against the nations in chs. 13 – 23 contain no oracle against Edom, though many of Judah's neighbors are mentioned. Edom has not, however, been overlooked (cf. 11:14). Indeed, its fall is so certain as to be described by the use of the prophetic perfect as "the people I have totally destroyed."

The NIV margin reading at v.2 makes this comment on the phrase "totally destroy":"The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them; also in verse 5." This had been the position of Jericho in the days of Joshua (see Jos 6:17 – 21 and NIV mg.). In some respects, although not in others, cities, persons, and articles thus given over in destruction to the Lord were like sacrifices, for in Leviticus 27:28 – 29 they are, like the sacrifices, said to be most holy to the LORD. This is probably why v.6 goes on to speak of sacrificial animals.The inhabitants of Edom, under divine judgment, were like sacrificial animals, and their fate was death.Yet the antagonistic Edomites were not like the comparatively docile domestic animals employed in the sacrificial ritual, so the prophet looks beyond the domestic scene to the herds of wild oxen (v.7) that no doubt roamed parts of Edom's territory as well as the steppes of Bashan farther north (Ps 22:12). They too will die.

8 – 10 The word "judgment" in v.5 sets the slaughter in Edom in a moral context, and this is emphasized in v.8. There are strong links of terminology with the judgment on Edom in ch. 63 (see esp. v.4). Young (in loc.), writing of the divine vengeance, says, "It is not mingled with malice and evil as is the case with human vengeance. It is a quality that in God is divine and praiseworthy and in the execution of which God is honoured and glorified."

The same may be said of his wrath. This act of vengeance is also to further his purposes for Jerusalem, which, in times of weakness in Judah and strength in

Edom, may well have cause to fear a threat from the south. There is an implied comparison with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a historical judgment that the prophet often uses for purposes of comparison (cf. 1:9 – 10; 3:9; 13:19) and that is made explicit in Jeremiah 49:17 – 18.

In commenting on v.10, Alexander, 24, says, “The remarkable gradation and accumulation of terms denoting perpetuity can scarcely be expressed in a translation.” Young (in loc.), however, makes an attempt; “Night and day it is not quenched; for even its smoke keeps ascending. From generation to generation it will burn. For ever and ever there is no one passing through it.” Edom’s judgment will be so complete, so permanent, that it will be utterly desolate. The final line of v.10 may mean that not only will Edom be unable to harass Zion; she will not even witness the passage of armies from beyond her borders on their way to attack Judah.

11 – 15 Isaiah’s references to fauna are always of interest but contain uncertain items (see Notes; cf. also the Note at 13:21 – 22). Precise identification of these creatures matters little, for the general thrust of the prophet’s thought is clear. As Oswalt says (in loc.), “It will not do to take the figures too literally. Obviously, a land of burning pitch and brimstone could hardly afford a home to animals of any kind. However, it is the points being made that are of significance rather than the absolute, literal fulfillment of a poetic image.” Edom will become utterly desolate. There may be a hint of contrast between the creatures of the wild here and the domestic animals the inhabitants have been likened to in v.6.

Verses 11b – 12 stand alone in the midst of all these references to wild creatures. Verse 11b employs architectural language in a way we have encountered before — though with reference to Israel — in 28:16 – 17. What looks at first like a suggestion that Edom, now destroyed, may be reconstructed, becomes, in the prophet’s paradoxical language, a warning that God is instead measuring it up for destruction.

Clements (in loc.) is almost certainly correct in suggesting that these references to chaos and desolation contain “a deliberate reference back to the description of the formless void of the world before God imposed the created order upon it (Gen 1:2).” The words translated “chaos” and “desolation” are exactly the same as those rendered “formless and empty” in Genesis 1:1, and

architectural language often occurs in OT descriptions of God's creative work, not least in Isaiah itself (48:13; cf. Job 26; 7 – 11; Am 9:6). Such language gains in appropriateness from the fact that the judgment on Edom occurs in a context of universal judgment.

The RSV's translation of the difficult words in v.12 (see Notes) is attractive: "They shall name it No Kingdom There." This provides a kind of parallel to the description of Egypt in 30:7 as "Rahab the Do-Nothing." In any case, the main thought is clear. Just as a measuring line suggests architectural order, so a kingdom suggests social order; but there will be none.

Miscall, 85, points out that the first two lines of v.15 are remarkable because they have four verbs, not one with a direct object; "this accentuates the action." Seitz (in loc.), commenting not only on the number of creatures present in vv.13 – 15 but also on the number of references to a creature and its mate in vv.14 – 16, thinks that there is an allusion here to the story of Noah: "Edom has been returned to a state similar to the one after the flood, with only animals and their mates as inhabitants."

16 – 17 Miscall, 86ff., treats these verses as a transition from the "Nightmare" of the rest of the chapter to the "Dream" of ch. 35, and he sees the two main parts of the poem not, as most commentators, in chronological sequence, but as a depiction of simultaneous scenes. It hardly seems possible to prove which understanding is correct, but Miscall's view certainly harmonizes with the eternal nature both of punishment and of life in the NT.

The opening exhortation of v.16 is noteworthy. What is "the scroll of the LORD "? There are numerous suggestions, including the law (Calvin), Scripture generally (Motyer), the book of life, and other passages in Isaiah. It seems more than likely, however, as both Young and O. Kaiser recognize, that it is the prophecy just given. Putting prophetic oracles into written form has importance because it makes possible later recognition of God's veracity.What the Lord has said comes to pass because it is he, the God of truth, who has said it.

The emphasis of some biblical theology on promise and fulfillment as a major biblical theme is healthy, for Scripture is God's witness to his own faithfulness. The Spirit of God effects what his word has promised, and the birds and animals

gathering in Edom are mute testimony to this. Just as God apportioned the world among its human inhabitants (Dt 32:8), so now he will order the new homes of these creatures in Edom with each given its proper place. Even in his judgments — perhaps especially in these — God is concerned that everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way (cf. 1Co 14:40).

NOTES

2 Miscall, 30, points out how often the terminology of anger is used later in Isaiah (e.g., in 42:25; 47:6; 51:13; 54:8 – 9; 57:16 – 17; 63:3 – 6; 66:15).

6 Bozrah, the Edomite capital, is modern Buseirah, twenty-seven miles south of the Dead Sea.

11 Miscall, on v.6, points out that animal imagery permeates Isaiah's vision from 1:3 to 66:17, that many different types of fauna are covered, and that about one hundred different terms are used, around half of them occurring nowhere else in the book. "Desert owl" translates קָאַת (*qā'at*). All kinds of birds have been suggested in identification of this.The NIV gives one of these possibilities.

קִפּוֹד (*qippôd*, "screech owl") is rendered simply "owl" in 14:23. Some commentators (e.g., Young) reckon it to be the hedgehog or porcupine, but a bird seems more likely here. יַנְשׁוֹף (*yanšôp*, "great owl") is particularly difficult to identify.

12 The first part of this verse is difficult because of a somewhat loose sentence structure. The NIV, NASB, and RSV (see comments) represent major options. For fuller discussion, see Young (in loc.) and Miscall (74, n.58).

13 For תַּנִּים (*tannîm*, "jackals"), see the Note on 13:21. The English "owls" renders בְּנוֹת יַעֲנָה (*bᵉnôt yaʿᵃnâ*, lit., "daughters of the Ya'anah"), which some have identified with ostriches.

14 The צִיִּים (*ṣîyîm*, "desert creatures"), the אִיִּים (*ʾîyîm*, "hyenas"), and אִיִּים (*ʾîyîm*, "wild goats") have all been mentioned before in 13:21 – 22. See Notes there.

15 קִפּוֹז (*qippôz*) is probably an owl (NIV), though it has also been identified as a hedgehog, porcupine, or even a snake. דַּיּוֹת (*dayyôt*, “falcons”) will certainly be falcons, kites, or vultures.

B. Blessing for God's People (35:1 – 10)

OVERVIEW

Exalted passages of Scripture often suffer at the hands of their readers because they tend not to be read in their contexts. The reader of Romans 8 (which, incidentally, in verses 19 – 21, reminds us at times of this chapter in Isaiah) would profit much from noting the immense emotional change that takes place at the opening of ch. 9. So here the beauty of ch. 35 is enhanced if only by contrast with the picture of wild desolation that ends ch. 34.

Many critics take it almost for granted that this chapter could not be written by Isaiah, largely because of its thematic links with material from later chapters, so widely denied to him by many critics, although often the same scholars remark on the many interesting and significant contrasts between chs. 34 and 35. Some think it has been introduced here deliberately to prepare the reader for the later exposition of the same themes in chs. 40 – 55. Some attribute it to Deutero-Isaiah himself (this question is discussed in general terms in the Introduction, pp. 438 – 48). This commentary will assume that Isaiah is the author of this oracle.

1 The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.
Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the LORD,
the splendor of our God.
3 Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;
4 say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;
your God will come,
he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you."
5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
7 The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness.
The unclean will not journey on it;
it will be for those who walk in that Way;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
9 No lion will be there,
nor will any ferocious beast get up on it;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there, 10 and the ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 The prophet refers to the desert (v.1) without indicating its location. The geographical references in v.2 incline us to think of Israel, the northern kingdom, while the mention of a return to Zion in v.10 suggests the southern kingdom. Then we note that v.2 is not so much strictly geographical as analogical, for the desert of v.1 is now to have a beauty characteristic of these places. Is the prophet thinking about the exiles returning from Babylon and crossing the many miles of desert lying between Mesopotamia and the Promised Land? In view of the promise that the messianic king will be seen in his beauty as governing a far-stretching land (33:17), should we perhaps think in terms of all the terrain either occupied or traversed by God's people, but with Zion (v.10) as the center of the kingdom and the goal of the returning exiles?

Widyapranawa (in loc.) draws attention to the fact that the passage refers to Zion, with its eschatological and messianic significance, rather than to Jerusalem. So, he maintains, we should not interpret the passage geographically but spiritually. Oswalt (in loc.), dealing with various interpretive options here,

will not restrict this poetic passage to one fulfillment, and this is a major point of Miscall's argument in his monograph on chs. 34 – 35. It is probably best for us to be open to a multi-layered understanding of the significance of the passage, even if we think the prophet may have had one specific meaning in his mind while writing it.

The Greeks spoke of the music of the spheres. In Job 38:7 God tells Job that at creation the morning stars sang together. In these verses nature bursts not only into bloom but also into song.The very environment of God's people reflects their joy at what God has done. If this is the locus clas-sicus for this thought in the OT, Romans 8:23 – 25 occupies the same place in the NT. God's purpose for his people will come to its consummation in a transfigured environment. The familiar "rose" of the KJV has become the "crocus" in the NIV, but many recent writers think the asphodel is probably intended.

The prophet does not say the wilderness will burst into bloom with the crocus but "like" it (v.2). He is probably thinking about the transformation that comes when winter ends and spring, with its characteristic flowers, suddenly comes with the advent of a few warm days. The whole face of the earth is changed. So will it be with the desert. Lebanon's glory is found in its wonderful cedars, while Carmel and the Plain of Sharon that runs south from it are also covered with trees and other plant life. In the Bible the glory of God is often manifested in history, but here it is seen in nature. The beauty and splendor of transformed nature will reflect the beauty and splendor of the Creator and Redeemer (cf. 40:5).

3 – 4 In Isaiah's own day fear gripped the hearts of so many of his people in the face of the external threat (see esp. 7:2 – 9). Fear in the heart (v.4) affects the ability of hands to work for God and of feet to walk in his ways (v.3). The command here is reminiscent of God's oft-repeated exhortation to Joshua to be strong and courageous (Dt 31:6 – 7, 23; Jos 1:6 – 7, 9, 18). This may mean the returning exiles of v.10 are already in view and needing, like Joshua, whose work brought them into the Promised Land in the first place, divine encouragement to make the journey.

The link between chs. 34 and 35 is emphasized not only by the contrasting pictures of topographical desolation and blessing but also by the use of *nāqām*

(“vengeance”) in both 34:8 and here in 35:4. Some think a reference to divine retributive vengeance a somewhat discordant note in such a context. Biblical realism, however, requires that peace be the result of righteous ness (cf. 11:4 – 9; 32:16 – 18), and righteous ness demands sin’s punishment. Only when God has judged his people’s enemies can his salvation in all of its fullness be theirs. We note also the repetition of the same word *nāqām* in 61:2 and 63:4, where, viewed in the context, the second makes clear allusion to the first.

5 – 7 The frequent references to spiritual blindness and deafness in passages such as 6:9 – 10 and 29:9 – 12, plus the promise that one day spiritual sight and hearing will be restored to the people (29:18), incline us at once to interpret v.5 — and in harmony with it v.6 — in spiritual terms. We note, however, that Luke 7:18 – 23 seems to allude to this chapter, with our Lord’s taking the language literally and physically. It can perhaps be understood at more than one level (see Introduction, pp. 451 – 52), for physical and spiritual sight and hearing have an analogical relationship, and in God’s ultimate kingdom his people will have glorified bodies and a perfected spirituality. The healed lame man is likely not simply to walk but actually to leap (cf. Ac 3:8), and, whatever the first utterance of a loosened tongue, it will certainly give vent to joy!

The human world has dominated the picture since v.3, but now renewed nature comes again into view. Basically, it is just lack of water that makes a desert, so it is no surprise that the renewed references to the transformed wilderness are alive with the sound of living streams and gushing springs. This water in fact affects the whole environment. The only sign of life before its advent was the jackal or wolf (v.7; see Note at 13:22). Such places had little attraction for human beings, but they will be replaced by the characteristic vegetation of lands possessing abundant water supplies.

8 – 10 This great passage takes a new turn now and begins to remind us even more markedly of ch. 40.The ancients did not build roads across deserts; to do so would have seemed economically stupid as well as risking a criminal waste of life. But this land is desert no longer, so roads across it are appropriate. One highway has the most exalted name, “the Way of Holiness” (v.8), because its goal is the holy city of Zion (v.10) — but also because it is intended for holy persons.

Some commentators (e.g., Young, in loc.) suggest this passage may owe some of its imagery to the "holy" ways of antiquity, the roads along which only the ceremonially clean might travel to their temples in fulfillment of cultic requirements. Israel's highways were all roads of pilgrimage, of course, as people traversed them at the feasts to meet the Lord in his holy temple. The passage also probably reflects the teaching of "entrance psalms" such as Psalms 15 and 24. In the light of Isaiah 26:7 – 8, "It will be for those who walk in that Way" (35:8) is probably to be understood morally, not simply ceremonially. This is still more evident if the NIV's text is correct in its rendering of the last line of v.8 (see Notes).

Verse 9 points to the hazardous conditions faced by desert travelers already seen in 30:6. This road will be free of predators, for it will be restricted to the redeemed. Verse 10 brings the whole oracle to a glorious conclusion. It is repeated in 51:11 and part of it in 61:7, so that it forms a striking link between the three parts of the book into which the book of Isaiah is often divided (see Introduction, pp. 438 – 48).

The most joyous seasons for Judah's people were the three pilgrim feasts, when they went up the highways to Zion singing pilgrim songs. The word "return" (v.10) shows them now coming from farther afield, probably not just from Babylonia but also from all the lands of the Dispersion (see 49:8 – 26).The joy of the oracle's beginning, which can be discerned in its every part, now takes over completely. Sorrow and sighing are denied any place in God's purpose of joy for his people (cf. Rev 21:1 – 4). Had the book of Isaiah concluded at this point, the reader would have been greedy to be satisfied; but there are still more wonders to come, for the greatest oracles of this wonderful book are still in prospect.

NOTES

2 In the context the words "they will see the glory of the LORD" appear to refer to the desert and the parched land of v.1. It is possible, however, that the prophet intends a reference to God's people, who come into view at v.3.

8 There are obscurities in the Hebrew that the NIV translates, "it will be for

those who walk in that Way," and there is some variety in modern English versions at this point. The NIV has the merit of harmony with the context. Its translation "wicked fools" reflects the widespread use of אֱוִיל (*ʾĕwîl*, "fool"; GK 211) with connotations of impiety (cf. Job 5:3; Pr 1:7). "The simple will not stray from it" in the NASB (cf. the NIV mg.) reflects the less pejorative use of the term in application to a simpleton (Pr 11:29; 14:3). The moral context here supports the former.

9 – 10 For the terminology of redemption and ransom, see comments at 43:1, 3.

VI. Isaiah and Hezekiah, Assyria and Babylon (36:1 – 39:8)

OVERVIEW

These chapters are largely narrative in character, which differentiates them from the rest of Isaiah, although there are shorter narrative elements in chs. 6 – 8 and 20. There are oracles of Isaiah here, but they are set in an historical framework.

In the overall pattern of the book, these chapters fulfill an important function. Chapters 1 – 35 have had the Assyrian menace as their main historical setting. Many other nations are touched, but the reader is never allowed for long to forget the dark shadow of that threat in the background. From the start of ch. 40, however, there is a new setting — the exile in Babylon. These four chapters, therefore, provide a historical transition, chs. 36 – 37 looking back to Assyria and chs. 38 – 39 on to Babylon. Motyer, who divides the book in a threefold way somewhat after the fashion of most modern scholars (although he holds that all is the work of Isaiah), places chs. 38 – 39 at the head of the second section. This emphasizes their function as a necessary introduction to chs. 40 – 55. In my outline, I have chosen rather to treat chs. 36 – 39 as transitional, although the two approaches virtually represent a distinction without a real difference.

These chapters are largely identical with 2 Kings 18 – 20, except for

Hezekiah's poem in Isaiah 38:9 – 20. Wildberger (in loc.) and Motyer (1993, 285 – 86; 1999, in loc.) both argue cogently that the two authors used some common source, although, as Motyer indicates, the Isaiah account was well established by the time of the Kings historian.

Most modern scholars reckon the record in Kings to be the original, holding that the redactor of Isaiah has inserted material from that book at this point for his own reasons. It is particularly alleged that the profile of Hezekiah has been touched up to present him as a man of faith in the face of the Assyrian menace. As Seitz (*Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* [Minneapo-lis: Fortress, 1991], 75), summing up this point of view (with which he expresses disagreement), says, "The Hezekiah of Isa 36 – 37 is a legendary figure, to be contrasted with the Hezekiah of authentic Isaiah oracles." He suggests that the positive picture of Hezekiah was there from the beginning, firmly anchored in Israel's tradition (61).

The case for the priority of the Isaiah account is by no means a thin one, for the majority view has serious flaws. The arguments for Isaianic priority are particularly well put in Young's commentary (2:556 – 65). Clements (in loc.) summarizes the contrary argument.This commentary assumes the priority of Isaiah, although few of the comments need to be altered if the "common source" view is correct.

In chs. 36 – 37 Hezekiah rises to a faith challenge in the face of a major threat to his kingdom and in ch. 38, although perhaps rather less robustly (see the comments on ch. 38), in a threat to his own life; but in ch. 39 he fails in faith, with dire consequences for his people. So the theme of faith binds the chapters together, and Hezekiah is much more trusting than Ahaz had been (see chs. 7 – 8). However, he too is not incapable of falling to the temptation to trust the arm of flesh rather than the living God. Oswalt (on ch. 38) considers that Hezekiah is presented in these chapters as representative of the people, so summing up in himself the possibility of trust in God for them but also their human frailty and proneness to self-trust.

R. E. Clements (*Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* [JSOTSup 13; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1980]) holds that there was a redaction of the book of Isaiah in the time of Josiah and that part of the account of

Sennacherib's invasion of Judah here and in the parallel passage in 2 Kings was colored theologically so as to show the inviolability of Jerusalem. Second Kings 18:14 – 16 says that Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib at Lachish. Clements places great stress on this and maintains that because of this Hezekiah was allowed to retain his throne and that the account of a divine intervention to save Jerusalem was contrived for theological purposes. A. R. Millard ("Sennacherib's Attack on Hezekiah," *TynBul* 36 [1985]: 61 – 77) and Seitz (in the introduction to his commentary, 13 – 15), both argue strongly against this, although from somewhat different perspectives.

We should not forget that the Chronicler has also given an account of Hezekiah's reign (2Ch 29 – 32), in which he writes at length about his reformation of worship, gives abbreviated accounts of the invasion and threat by Sennacherib and the visit of the Babylonian envoys, and briefly glances at Hezekiah's illness and recovery. This is almost completely overlooked by many writers; for instance, Seitz (*Zion's Final Destiny*) has a Scripture index that records a large number of references from 2 Kings 18 – 20, even more from Isaiah 36 – 39, but not one from Chronicles, although a perusal of the volume shows that its account is occasionally compared with those in Isaiah and Kings. The Chronicler's closing comments, which focus on the king's character, are particularly interesting and instructive.

A. The Deliverance of Jerusalem from Sennacherib (36:1 – 37:38)

OVERVIEW

A. E. Cundall (*Proverbs — Isaiah 1 – 39* [Lon-don: Scripture Union, 1968], 91) says, “This is history at its best, no dull recital of statistics and dates but an account which enables us to sense the haughty arrogance of the Assyrian and the chilling clutch of despair at the hearts of the Israelites.”Isaiah’s God-given facility with words, so evident in his use of many a vivid illustration, is now used in giving a graphic account of events in which he participated.

Historical criticism raises a number of problems about these two chapters. The first concerns the differing accounts given here and in the annals of Sennacherib, the Assyrian king. The differences are comparatively minor and can be explained largely in terms of Assyrian boastfulness, which was proverbial. Every conqueror is tempted to write up an account of his victories with some exaggeration, and the Assyrians had no allegiance to the God of truth to restrain them. cond problem relates to the part played by “Tirhakah, the Cushite king of Egypt” in the story (37:9), which seems at this point to be anachronistic. This difficulty has, however, been greatly reduced by the researches of K. A. Kitchen and others (see Note on 37:9). It is also said that the account of Hezekiah’s surrender to Sennacherib recorded in 2 Kings 18:13 – 16 cannot be squared with the story here. But the difficulty is only insuperable if we cannot conceive of a monarch deciding to continue his rebellion after an initial gesture of surrender.

Finally, it is taken almost for granted by most modern critics that these chapters are constructed from two separate narratives. Isaiah 36:1 – 37:7, with the addition of 37:37 – 38, makes up the first and 37:10 – 36 the second. Isaiah 36:8 – 9 contains the point of transition, though there is some disagreement as to the exact point of connection. E. J. Young, 2:540 – 55, has a useful appendix in which he examines the difficulties in detail, supporting the unity and accuracy of the whole passage as well as commenting on the other issues we have mentioned. K. A. Smelik (“Distortion of Old Testment Prophecy:The Purpose of Isaiah 26 and 27,”OtSt 24 [1989]: 70 – 93), using literary rather than historical

criteria, made a strong case for the passage's unity, and C. R. Seitz (*Zion's Final Destiny*, esp. ch. 3) also argues for a unified narrative, although without Young's commitment to its full historical accuracy.

The following exposition and notes will attempt to keep these issues in mind and to comment usefully on them, but the purpose of this series of commentaries is not primarily critical. Readers wishing to follow up these matters in more detail should consult the larger commentaries.

1 In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the
fortified cities of Judah and captured them. 2 Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander
with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at
the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field, 3 Eliakim son of Hilkiah
the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to
him.

4 The field commander said to them,
"Tell Hezekiah, " 'This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this
confidence of yours? 5 You say you have strategy and military strength — but you speak only
empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? 6 Look now, you are
depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if
he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him.7 And if you say to me,
"We are depending on the LORD our God"— isn't he the one whose high places and altars
Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?

8" 'Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand
horses — if you can put riders on them! 9 How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my
master's officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? 10
Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the LORD? The LORD himself
told me to march against this country and destroy it.' "

11 Then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the fi eld commander, "Please speak to your servants in
Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the
wall."

12 But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say
these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall — who, like you, will have to eat their own fi
lth and drink their own urine?"

13 Then the commander stood and called out in Hebrew, "Hear the words of the great king, the king
of Assyria! 14 This is what the king says: Do not let Hezekiah deceive you. He cannot deliver
you! 15 Do not let Hezekiah persuade you to trust in the LORD when he says, 'The LORD will
surely deliver us; this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.'

16 "Do not listen to Hezekiah. This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come
out to me. Then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink water from his
own cistern, 17 until I come and take you to a land like your own — a land of grain and new

wine, a land of bread and vineyards.

18 “Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, ‘The LORD will deliver us.’ Has the god of any
nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? 19 Where are the gods of
Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my
hand? 20 Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How
then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?”

21 But the people remained silent and said nothing in reply, because the king had commanded, “Do
not answer him.”

22 Then Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of
Asaph the recorder went to Hezekiah, with their clothes torn, and told him what the field
commander had said.

37:1When King Hezekiah heard this, he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and went into the
temple of the LORD. 2 He sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and the
leading priests, all wearing sackcloth, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz.3 They told him,“This is
what Hezekiah says: This day is a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace, as when children come
to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver them. 4 It may be that the LORD your God
will hear the words of the field commander, whom his master, the king of Assyria, has sent to
ridicule the living God, and that he will rebuke him for the words the LORD your God has heard.
Therefore pray for the remnant that still survives.”

5 When King Hezekiah’s offi cials came to Isaiah, 6 Isaiah said to them, “Tell your master, ‘This is
what the LORD says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard — those words with which the
underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. 7 Listen! I am going to put a spirit in him
so that when he hears a certain report, he will return to his own country, and there I will have him
cut down with the sword.’”

8 When the field commander heard that the king of Assyria had left Lachish, he withdrew and found
the king fighting against Libnah.

9 Now Sennacherib received a report that Tirhakah, the Cushite king of Egypt, was marching out to
fi ght against him. When he heard it, he sent messengers to Hezekiah with this word: 10 “Say to
Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, ‘Jerusalem
will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.’ 11 Surely you have heard what the kings of
Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? 12
Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them — the gods of
Gozan, Haran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? 13 Where is the king of
Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?”

14 Hezekiah received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the
LORD and spread it out before the LORD. 15 And Hezekiah prayed to the LORD: 16 “O LORD
Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the
kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. 17 Give ear, O LORD, and hear; open
your eyes, O LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God.

18 “It is true, O LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. 19
They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only
wood and stone, fashioned by human hands.20Now, O LORD our God, deliver us from his hand,

so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O LORD, are God.”

21 Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria, 22 this is the word the LORD has spoken against him:

“The Virgin Daughter of Zion
despises and mocks you.
The Daughter of Jerusalem
tosses her head as you flee.

23 Who is it you have insulted and blasphemed?
Against whom have you raised your voice
and lifted your eyes in pride?
Against the Holy One of Israel!

24 By your messengers
you have heaped insults on the Lord.
And you have said,
‘With my many chariots
I have ascended the heights of the mountains,
the utmost heights of Lebanon.
I have cut down its tallest cedars,
the choicest of its pines.
I have reached its remotest heights,
the finest of its forests.

25 I have dug wells in foreign lands
and drunk the water there.
With the soles of my feet
I have dried up all the streams of Egypt.’

26 “Have you not heard?
Long ago I ordained it.
In days of old I planned it;
now I have brought it to pass,
that you have turned fortified cities
into piles of stone.

27 Their people, drained of power,
are dismayed and put to shame.
They are like plants in the field,
like tender green shoots,
like grass sprouting on the roof,
scorched before it grows up.

28 “But I know where you stay
and when you come and go
and how you rage against me.

29 Because you rage against me
and because your insolence has reached my ears,
I will put my hook in your nose
and my bit in your mouth,
and I will make you return
by the way you came.

30 “This will be the sign for you, O Hezekiah:
“This year you will eat what grows by itself,
and the second year what springs from that.
But in the third year sow and reap,
plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
31 Once more a remnant of the house of Judah
will take root below and bear fruit above.
32 For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant,
and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.
33 “Therefore this is what the LORD says concerning the king of Assyria:
“He will not enter this city
or shoot an arrow here.
He will not come before it with shield
or build a siege ramp against it.
34 By the way that he came he will return;
he will not enter this city,”
declares the LORD.
35 “I will defend this city and save it,
for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!”
36 Then the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning — there were all the dead bodies!
37 So Sennacherib king of Assyria broke camp and withdrew. He returned to Nineveh and stayed there.
38 One day, while he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sharezer cut him down with the sword, and they escaped to the land of Ararat. And Esarhaddon his son succeeded him as king.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 These events can be dated to the year 701 BC, which raises a problem about the reference to the fourteenth year of Hezekiah’s reign (v.1; see Notes). In his annals Sennacherib declared, “I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless villages in their vicinity, and conquered (them)” (*ANET*, 288).

The NIV translates the familiar “Rabshakeh” of the KJV as “field commander” (v.2). Second Kings 18:17 refers to the presence of two other Assyrian officials with him. The term means “chief cupbearer,” but this must relate to its remote origins. It had become a military title. He was probably

second only to the Tartan, or supreme commander, mentioned in 20:1. Lachish, an important fortress city of Judah that guarded the road to Egypt, was captured by Sennacherib; and its siege is depicted on an Assyrian bas-relief now housed in the British Museum. The location of the main Assyrian army at this point, because of its strategic position, precluded any possible hope of Egyptian help to Hezekiah.

Without doubt the reference to the aqueduct in v.2 has more than a purely narrative purpose. The reader recalls the attack of external enemies on Judah recorded in ch. 7. Once again, as in the days of Ahaz, Jerusalem is threatened by her foes. On that earlier occasion, the aqueduct had been a king's place of decision. Would he trust God or call on Assyria for aid? Much has happened over the three decades and more that separated the two events, and it is the Assyrian himself who is now the threat, underlining the folly of Ahaz on that earlier occasion. The foe now is much more powerful than the two allies of the earlier event, and there are some other differences in the circumstances, not the least of which is the fact that Judah's king cannot stand on that spot any longer, for there is a major Assyrian official standing there! Nevertheless the spiritual issue remains unchanged. How will the son of Ahaz react?

The king of Assyria does not come personally but sends three of his leading men (2Ki 18:17), and Hezekiah does the same (v.3). In this way he preserves some regal dignity.

4 – 7 Cundall (*Proverbs — Isaiah 1 – 39* [London: Scripture Union, 1968], in loc.) gives a brief but exceptionally helpful treatment of the eight-pronged argument of the field commander. This man argues:

- that mere words seem a futile attack against the Assyrian army (v.5);
- that Egypt is unreliable (v.6);
- that Hezekiah has, so the Assyrian alleges, insulted the Lord by closing his shrines apart from the Jerusalem temple (v.7);
- that Judah is unskilled in the use of horses in warfare (vv.8 – 9);
- that the Lord has himself sent the Assyrians against Jerusalem (v.10);
- that Hezekiah's leadership cannot be trusted (vv.14 – 15, 18);
- that they will be treated well if they surrender (vv.16 – 17);
- and that all other threatened cities have failed to withstand the Assyrian might (vv.18 – 20).

Satan himself could hardly produce a more masterly piece of verbal cajolery. His references to the Lord are hardly consistent but, as Oswalt (in loc.) says, “his purpose is not rational argumentation but demoralization.”

The grandiose designation of the field commander’s master contrasts sharply with the absence even of the word “king” in his own reference to Judah’s monarch (v.4). The tone of the speech is therefore insolent from the beginning, and the opening question shows its essential design to undermine any confidence the people may have. The words “strategy and military strength” (v.5) translate ʿēṣâ ûgᵉbûrâ, rendered “counsel and . . . power” in 11:2. Hezekiah, like all Judah’s kings, is the contemporary custodian of the messianic promises, as the dynastic expression “house of David” in 7:13 reminds us. The field commander’s words may even have encouraged him to trust in the God whose messianic promises are an implicit assurance that his line will continue.

Unknown to the field commander, his words in v.6 tally exactly with what Isaiah was saying about the futility of trusting in Egypt (30:3 – 7; 31:3). His vivid illustration may also have reminded them of the prophet’s words, for he so often used analogy to appeal to the mind through the inner eye. No doubt the Assyrians were well aware of Hezekiah’s religious reformation (2Ki 18:3 – 7). Unlike 2 Kings 18:22, the opening of v.7 uses the second person singular, which may represent a purer text; for scribal change from singular to plural is more likely than vice versa, and the field commander refers to Hezekiah here as though he is not addressing him. Clearly the speech, though ostensibly intended for Hezekiah, is so phrased that those relaying it to him will ponder its import.The theological misunderstanding shown by the field commander at this point argues for the speech’s authenticity, making it unnecessary to dub it “a free creation by the author of the narrative” (Clements, in loc.).

8 – 10 The field commander’s offer is sarcastic (v.8). Judah is painfully weak in cavalry and has looked to the Egyptian army to supply this lack (v.9; cf. 31:1, 3). He has not yet attacked the Lord’s ability to save his people, reserving that for later (vv.18 – 20). He does, however, imply the Lord’s anger against his people.Verse 10, like v.6, connects with Isaiah’s own message; for he has constantly taught that the Assyrian armies, wicked as they are, are accomplishing God’s purposes of judgment (cf. esp. 10:5 – 11). Does the field commander actually know these prophecies? Almost certainly not; rather, his assertion appears based on the misunderstanding reflected in the words of v.7.

11 – 12 Aramaic, eventually the common language of Palestine, was at this time the lingua franca of the Fertile Crescent, used normally in diplomatic exchanges but unintelligible to the mass of the people. The comment by Hezekiah's officials (v.11) perhaps suggests that any confidence they have left is fast ebbing away as a result of this speech (cf. v.22), and they fear its effect on the people.The truculent vulgarity of the field commander's reply again argues for the authenticity of his speech.

13 – 15 Far from changing the language of his speech, the field commander raises his voice so that the wider audience can hear more clearly (v.13). He gives as yet no arguments against faith in the Lord's power to deliver his city (vv.14 – 15). The field commander has not yet moved from asserting God's unwillingness (v.7, 10) to contemptuous rejection of his ability (vv.18 – 20).

16 – 17 Some events in modern history, such as the seige of Paris in the Franco-Prussian war and that of Leningrad in World War II, underline how dreadful a seige can be. The wording of the appeal in v.16 may indicate that many from the surrounding villages have taken refuge within Jerusalem at this time, though the description here may be a conventional one for family self-sufficiency. The frankness of v.17 is not at first easy to understand. The threat of exile is hardly likely to prove an extra inducement to his hearers.

A little imagination may supply the answer. The people are actually at the city walls at this time. In the foreground is the Assyrian detachment, including the arrogant speaker himself. Behind them, however, the people can see the devastation these same Assyrians have wrought (cf., e.g., 1:7 – 9).Where are the vines and fig trees this man is speaking of? They are no more. Perhaps he sees the direction of their eyes and tells them the truth for the small element of promise it contains. He knows that the Assyrian deportation policy is well known.

18 – 20 This field commander has surely studied the psychological effects of rhetoric! The reference to exile in v.17 makes the people think about Samaria and its fate twenty years earlier. Very well, he will exploit this. He lists some of the main places conquered by Assyria, concluding with Samaria (v.19). Each had its distinctive gods, but all proved ineffective against the might of Assyria. Isaiah

is himself to declare the gods of paganism — even of Babylonian paganism (46:1 – 2) — quite ineffective. It would be interesting to know what the field commander understands Samaria's religion to be. Had he realized that Yahweh was Samaria's God too, he would surely have used this as his crowning argument. This suggests, then, that the Yahwism of the northern kingdom had become so submerged during the final period of its apostate existence as to be no longer recognizable, even by a foe, as the same religion as Hezekiah's.

The field commander's conclusion (v.20) is apparently his punch line. Yet such a frontal attack on their faith, weak as it is, may well rouse his hearers to greater trust. The Lord has such a wonderful record of delivering his people, right from the days of the exodus, that this man is now treading on thin ice.

21 – 22 The silence on the wall was apparently broken only by the request of v.11 (cf. Ecc 3:7).

37:1 – 4 Hezekiah's attitude in this crisis is spiritually exemplary, presenting a great contrast both with Ahaz (cf. ch. 7) and with his own former attitude (2Ki 18:14 – 16). As Oswalt (in loc.) says, "It is here that the greatness of Hezekiah comes to the fore. He sees what is called for and does it. Repentance is the order of the day. Nor does he call the priests to him. Rather, it is he who must go to the Lord's house, to admit his and his nation's folly in their foolish dependence upon Egypt." His donning of sackcloth signifies a spirit of repentance (cf. 1Ki 21:27; Da 9:3; Mt 11:21).

The account in 2 Kings places the visit of the field commander after Hezekiah's first payment of tribute to the king of Assyria at Lachish. Many see the two as different, irreconcilable accounts of the same event, but this is surely unnecessary. That the king of Assyria should demand tribute and then absolute surrender is not without historical parallel, nor is the change in Hezekiah's attitude inconceivable. Many a believer has been led by the grace of God from conduct inconsistent with his faith to a more confident trust in his God.

Hezekiah goes into God's temple (v.1) and sends for God's servant, the prophet. The king probably hopes for a reassuring word from the Lord as well as a promise that the prophet will pray. Young (in loc.) comments on v.3: "Whereas on the part of many the day may have been one of distress because of the

presence of the Assyrians, for Hezekiah the distress was probably deeper. He saw that the real calamity lay not so much in the presence of a physical enemy as in the displeasure of the Lord that now was being visited upon the nation."

The reference to childbirth (v.3) is probably proverbial. The words "it may be" (v.4) do not betoken lack of faith but a realization on the king's part that the people, through their sins, have forfeited any right to divine deliverance. Their only hope is in God's unmerited favor. Of course, in one sense the Lord has heard the words of the field commander, for he hears everything; but the king uses the verb in the pregnant sense (e.g., cf. Dt 18:19) that implies that action will be taken as a result of what has been heard. There is a sense of sin implicit also in his reference to Yahweh as "the LORD *your* God," for Isaiah has shown a faithfulness that rebukes both people and king. Nevertheless, "to ridicule the living God" and "the remnant" are expressions of hope in God because of his nature and his purpose for the remnant of his people, so often expressed through Isaiah himself (e.g., 10:20 – 27).

5 – 7 Isaiah once before counseled a king not to be afraid (7:4), but Ahaz proved unresponsive to God's reassuring word. The expression "the underlings" (v.6, lit.,"the young men") may be simply an insulting reference to the field commander and the other high officers forming the Assyrian delegation: "What pomposity of title and verbiage — and what were they but boys at the beck and call of Sennacherib" (Motyer, 1999, in loc.). Quite probably, of course, the field commander's words were not the only insults against their God to reach the ears of Jerusalem's people from the Assyrians outside the walls, so that the phrase may describe the Assyrians as such.

The NIV's "Listen! (v.7) treats the Hebrew *hinnî* (lit., "Look"; GK 2180) as a purely formal command to attend. True, the word occurs frequently; but especially in such a strongly imaginative writer as Isaiah we would expect that he intends his hearers to visualize what he has declared. Earlier, Isaiah attributed a spirit of dizziness to the Lord's action (see comment on 19:14).The reference to "a certain report" is often taken to apply to the report about Tirhakah (v.9). This, in fact, did not send Sennach-erib back to Assyria but rather gave him greater concern to reduce Hezekiah to submission.

Is v.7 irreconcilable with v.36, as so many critics suggest? In fact, v.37 records

two events: the withdrawal of the threat to Jerusalem and the return to Nineveh. It is not difficult to imagine that the first is caused by the miracle recorded in v.36 and the second by a report of trouble elsewhere, perhaps in Babylon. What is more difficult to conceive is that a redactor would place the material together (see general introduction to chs. 36 – 37) if it was evident that the accounts could not be reconciled. For the manner of Sennacherib's death, cf. v.38.

8 This detail, which appears to have no relevance to the main message of these two chapters, is incidental testimony to the concern for the truth of fact that motivates the author.

9 – 13 The report of the Egyptian army's approach gives greater urgency to the bid to gain Jerusalem (v.9). No military leader welcomes a war on two fronts, even if his forces are vastly superior to those of both enemies added together. The message sent by letter, as v.14 makes clear, repeats much that the field commander said (cf. 36:13 – 20), except that he attributes deception now to the Lord rather than to Hezekiah himself (v.10). This is truly devilish, for the first satanic attack on humanity impugned the veracity of God (Ge 3:1 – 5).

The reader of the NIV at first gets a shock when seeing Hezekiah's God designated as "god" (contrast the NASB), but we must remember that these are the words of a pagan and represent his valuation of the God of Israel. Sennacherib's reference to his forefathers (vv.11 – 12) shows his pride as a member of an all-conquering dynasty. The list of names is longer — and therefore even more impressive — than that given in 36:19. Commenting on v.13, Oswalt (in loc.) points out that these Syrian cities have recently fallen. "Terrible things had befallen kings whom Hezekiah may have known personally. They too may have trusted oracles from their gods and they had been flayed alive, impaled, mutilated, and killed."

14 – 20 Some critics make much of the Deu-teronomic character of this prayer, as though this means it must have been created by the author or the author of the parallel passage in 2 Kings. But we must remember that the kings were given express instructions to study Deuteronomy (cf. Dt 17:14 – 20).

Hezekiah prays in similar fashion to the early church when Peter and John were threatened by the authorities (see esp.Ac 4:24). His address to God is

theological in the best sense. As "LORD Almighty" (v.16, lit., "Yahweh of hosts"; see comment on 1:9), he has all power; and, as he is the sovereign Creator, the Assyrians are subject to that power. Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out the lack of the Hebrew definite article with the phrase "living God," that this is "indefiniteness for the sake of emphasis (*cf.* 31:8). Here, the Lord is set apart as in a different category from all other claimants to deity (*cf.* Heb 1:2, 'a Son!')." The word "alone" (v.20) is a critical glance at the paganism of the Assyrians. But as God of Israel, manifesting his presence between the cherubim in that very temple, Yahweh has a special relationship with his people and so has a concern to protect them from their enemies.

True prayer faces facts but interprets them theologically, and this is what Hezekiah does in vv.18 – 19. Isaiah often makes the same point about idols in contrast to Israel's sole deity in later oracles (e.g., 44:9 – 20). This points to the theological oneness of this passage with the so-called Deutero-Isaiah section of the book. The act of salvation he prays for will be a revelation to all the kingdoms — acknowledging as they did other gods — that Yahweh alone is God.

21 – 25 Oswalt (in loc.) points out that among those who hold to multiple authorship of the book are some who at one time considered vv.21 – 29 authentically Isaianic; but those same scholars (e.g., Wildberger, in loc.) now assert that they cannot be by Isaiah. Oswalt then says, "These kinds of polar opposites, both put forward with equal certainty, do not create confidence in the methods or the results."

Once more (cf. vv.5 – 7) God speaks to Hezekiah through Isaiah, but this time in an oracle that could have been placed in chs. 13 – 23, had there not been a special purpose in putting it in its historical context. Verses 21 – 22 clearly imply that even though it is God's purpose to deliver his people, it is important for Hezekiah to pray. God acts according to an eternal purpose, but in answer to prayers he has led his people to offer.

The oracle of vv.22 – 29 is superbly translated in the NIV, with a feeling not only for the meaning but also for the sound of words and for poetic form. It is a taunt song with the characteristic "limping" rhythm in Hebrew. In v.22 Jerusalem is a young girl rebuffing with contempt the unwelcome advances of a churl.

Perhaps there is a suggestion that she is betrothed to the Holy One of Israel, for Isaiah later uses the figure of marriage and divorce in relation to Israel (50:1).This title for God is characteristic of Isaiah's prophecies (see Introduction, p. 446).

Also characteristic is the emphasis on pride (v.23), especially the quotation of arrogant words by a foreign monarch (cf. 10:12 – 14; 14:13 – 15). The annals of Sennacherib, where he records his victories, are dominated by the first person singular. It looks as though the course of his boasting follows that of his conquering marches, with emphasis on his ability to overcome any natural obstacle in his path (v.24). The mountainous, tree-covered terrain of Lebanon could not hold him back, nor could the waterless lands of southern Palestine and Sinai (v.25). The Nile Delta streams are equally powerless to stop him, for he has but to tread on them. This final claim goes beyond the facts but is probably made in anticipation of a great victory over Tirhakah (cf. v.9).

26 – 29 "Have you not heard?" (v.26) anticipates the great rhetorical questions of 40:21, 28 and, as there, draws attention to Israel's God. All the great Assyrian conquests are, in fact, to be ascribed to God, whose instruments they are. So many earlier oracles in Isaiah speak of judgment on the nations of the Fertile Crescent, including Israel and Judah; and many of them were executed through Assyria. Everything has been preordained, so that Assyria can boast of nothing. The descriptive words of vv.26 – 27 might almost have come from the lips of the Assyrian himself. That they come instead from God shows their truth, for without doubt the conquests of this nation were utterly devastating. Theirs was a ferocity and ruthlessness the eastern Mediterranean had never seen before, and that has hardly been surpassed since, at least on the grand scale.The thought of v.27 reappears in 40:24, though with express reference to human agency.

God knows all there is to know not only about his own people (Ps 139) but also about the Assyrians, and Isaiah expresses this in language that had become standard (v.28; Dt 28:6; Ps 121:8; et al.). The Assyrians often treated their prisoners like animals, using the rope and the nose hook. God will do the same. For the last line of v.29, cf. vv.34 and 37.

30 – 32 In most circumstances Scripture does not encourage us to ask for signs, though there is an exception in 7:11, in a passage that forms a complete

contrast to this, exhibiting unbelief instead of faith. The word is sometimes followed by a sign (e.g., in 1Sa 10:1 – 7), as here (v.30). The Assyrian occupation of Judah has devastated its fields (1:7 – 8). It will take several years to recover fully. If this oracle is given at the close of one season, the season that is imminent will hardly be normal, for the people will have building as well as agricultural tasks to perform (32:13 – 14). The prophecy is therefore consistent with the immediate departure of the Assyrians.

Characteristically, Isaiah moves from the literal to the figurative. The remnant (v.31) is pictured as a vine or fruit tree (cf. 27:6). This prophecy relates specifically to the deliverance from Sennacherib, and the reference to a remnant in Jerusalem (v.32) reminds us of 1:9. God underlines this prophecy and its certain fulfillment most impressively. The word and sign become a threefold cord when the great affirmation that ends this oracle is spoken, putting this prophecy on a par with the great messianic oracle of ch. 9, which also closes in the same way (9:7).The two are linked, for it is of David's line (represented now by Hezekiah) that the Messiah will come and on David's throne (in threatened Jerusalem) that he will reign.

33 – 35 This brief, trenchant oracle puts the matter clearly and painfully. Far from entering Jerusalem, the Assyrian king will not even subject it to a normal siege (vv.33 – 34). Sennacherib did write that he shut up Hezekiah in the city like a caged bird, which tallies well with the vivid descriptions of 1:8, but we should note that the reference to a siege in that earlier chapter is by way of analogy, not of literal statement, so that Sennacherib's further words about raising earthworks are either lies or relate to an earlier occasion. The phrase "for my sake" (v.35) shows that the Lord answers prayer (cf. v.20) and the succeeding phrase that he keeps his promises (cf. 2Sa 7). This is most reassuring, for the word of God and prayer constitute the dual basis of the spiritual life.

36 – 37 The chapter's pace quickens from v.33 onward, for a brief oracle is followed immediately by the swift, dramatic record of its fulfillment. The verb used of the angel of the Lord (*yes*m.*e* ,m, "went out") is employed of going forward to battle. The angel of the Lord is a divine figure, at once distinguished from God and yet identified with him.

Herodotus, the Greek historian, recorded that one night Sennacherib's army

camp was infested by mice (or rats), which destroyed the arrows and shield-thongs of the soldiers. He probably got this tradition from Egyptian sources, and it seems like a somewhat garbled version of the event recorded here. First Samuel 6:4 suggests, quite appropriately, that the rat symbolized plague, which may well have been the means used by the angel of the Lord. Lib-nah (v.8) could have been on the route to Egypt; or else the Assyrians might by now have moved further in Egypt's direction. The unexpected, shocking carnage seen the next morning is most vividly described in the four Hebrew words that conclude v.36. In a masterpiece of understatement, Young (in loc.) comments on v.37, "This was no place for Sennacherib."

38 A twenty-year interval separates vv.37 and 38, but we get the impression we are meant to view Sennacherib's death as a further manifestation of divine judgment. His death at the hands of his own progeny is confirmed from Assyrian sources, though each of the two accounts adds something to the knowledge of it we could have obtained from one only. His death when at worship in a pagan shrine should be seen as further evidence of the main thesis of these two chapters: the God of Israel is the living and true God, and all other deities are powerless.

NOTES

1 Young, 2:540 – 42, outlines and discusses the main solutions to the problem of Hezekiah's accession date. The simplest solution is to substitute "twenty-fourth" for "fourteenth" in this verse and its counterpart, 2 Kings 18 – 13. Conjectural emendation should be adopted only with great caution, but in this case it seems warranted. This was a simple slip for a scribe to make, as Young demonstrates, especially since in the ancient-pointed script the two words would have been even closer in appearance than in the later form. On this see also Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 211.

3 For Eliakim and Shebna, see 22:15, 20. Eliakim now occupies Shebna's former office, with the latter reduced to the role of secretary. Joah's name appears nowhere else. The exact nature of the three offices is uncertain, but much can be adduced from Egyptian parallels.The first appears to have been a

vizier governing the country in the name of the king. The second was next in line and dealt with the king's personal and state correspondence. The third was the monarch's official spokesman (see R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* [London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961], 129 – 32).

19 For Hamath and Arpad here, see the note at 10:9. Sepharvaim is perhaps the same place as Sibraim, which Ezekiel 47:16 locates in Syria, but this is uncertain.

37:9 Tirhakah was not king of Egypt until more than ten years after this event. But he may have been in charge of its army and have been given this title proleptically before the book reached its final form (cf. K.A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt* [*1100 – 650* BC] [Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973], 154 – 72, 387 – 93; also *ZPEB*, 5:754 – 55).

For Cush, see comment on 18:1. For the MT's וַיִּשְׁמַע (*wayyišmaʿ*, "to learn"), the LXX here and in 2 Kings 19:9 assumed וַיָּשָׁב (*wayyāšōb*, "and he turned back"). Either is possible, and it is better in such a case to retain the MT.

12 Gozan (cf. 2Ki 17:6; 18:11) was on the Chaboras, a northern tributary of the Euphrates, east of Haran (Ge 11:31; 12:5; et al.), which itself was on the Belikh, another tributary. Rezeph is probably modern Rusafe, twenty miles south of Haran. Eden, not identical with Eden in early Genesis, lies north and south of the middle Euphrates. Tel Assar may be its capital,Tel Barsip.

13 Hena and Ivvah (cf. 2Ki 18:34; 19:13) cannot be identified. See Note at 36:19 for Sepharvaim and at 10:9 for Hamath and Arpad.

20 The NIV follows lQIsa and 2 Kings 19:19, probably correctly, in reading "you alone, O LORD, are God" instead of "you alone are the LORD," as in the MT.

25 Once again, as in v.20, the NIV follows 1QIsa and the 2 Kings parallel instead of the MT.The textual agreement of lQIsa and 2 Kings must be reckoned strong.

27 Here the 1QIsa and 2 Kings reading followed in the NIV is supported by

some MT and LXX manuscripts.

38 The god Nisroch is unknown. Young (in loc.) sees the name as a possibly intentional corruption of Marduk. For some translation difficulties in the text, see Motyer (1993, in loc.).

B. Hezekiah's Illness (38:1 – 22)

1 In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of
Amoz went to him and said, "This is what the LORD says: Put your house in order, because you are
going to die; you will not recover."

2Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the LORD, 3"Remember, O LORD, how I
have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in
your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly.

4 Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: 5 "Go and tell Hezekiah, 'This is what the LORD,
the God of your father David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen
years to your life. 6 And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will
defend this city.

7" 'This is the LORD's sign to you that the LORD will do what he has promised: 8 I will make
the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.'" So the
sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down.

9 A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery:

10 I said, "In the prime of my life
must I go through the gates of death
and be robbed of the rest of my years?"

11 I said, "I will not again see the LORD,
the LORD, in the land of the living;
no longer will I look on mankind,
or be with those who now dwell in this world.

12 Like a shepherd's tent my house
has been pulled down and taken from me.
Like a weaver I have rolled up my life,
and he has cut me off from the loom;
day and night you made an end of me.

13 I waited patiently till dawn,
but like a lion he broke all my bones;
day and night you made an end of me.

14 I cried like a swift or thrush,
I moaned like a mourning dove.
My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens.
I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!"

15 But what can I say?
He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this.
I will walk humbly all my years
because of this anguish of my soul.

16 Lord, by such things men live;
and my spirit finds life in them too.
You restored me to health
and let me live.

17 Surely it was for my benefit
that I suffered such anguish.
In your love you kept me
from the pit of destruction;
you have put all my sins
behind your back.
18 For the grave cannot praise you,
death cannot sing your praise;
those who go down to the pit
cannot hope for your faithfulness.
19 The living, the living — they praise you,
as I am doing today;
fathers tell their children
about your faithfulness.
20 The LORD will save me,
and we will sing with stringed instruments
all the days of our lives
in the temple of the LORD.
21 Isaiah had said, “Prepare a poultice of fi gs and apply it to the boil, and he will recover.”
22 Hezekiah had asked, “What will be the sign that I will go up to the temple of the LORD?”

COMMENTARY

1 The phrase “in those days” uses different words but with similar meaning to “at that time,” which opens ch. 39. In fact, all these events probably occur within about two years (see Note on v.5). This means, then, that the time reference in this verse is to be taken generally. The phrases also indicate a spiritual link between chs. 38 and 39, which will be explored in our exposition. The nature of Hezekiah’s illness is not mentioned, nor is it stated that it is punishment for sin. God’s command suggests Hezekiah has a duty to his family and kingdom to arrange their future administration. Young (in loc.) quotes Vitringa:

> According to natural causes he (Hezekiah) would have to die, unless with his aid God should intervene beyond the ordinary; God, however, had decided not to intervene, unless at the supplication of the king and the trials of his faith and hope. Moreover, in cases of this kind (Gen 20:3) the condition is not expressed, in order that God may call it forth as voluntary.

2 – 3 Hezekiah’s prayer may have been a direct result of putting his house in order, or at least this may have intensified it; for, by comparing v.5 with 2 Kings 21:1, we see he would have been without an heir if he had died within three years. Does he turn to the wall to sulk, as Ahab did (1Ki 21:4), or is it to shut out

the faces of others while he prays? Probably the latter. Second Kings 18:5 – 6 not only confirms Hezekiah's statements about himself (v.3) but also shows that his manner of life is grounded in faith in God. It is to be viewed more as implicitly pleading promises such as Deuteronomy 7:12 – 15 than as reliance on his own merits.

4 – 6 God's self-description as "the God of your father David" (v.5) implies he is keeping faith with his word, especially his promises to David in 2 Samuel 7. God is even more concerned about the continuance of David's dynasty than Hezekiah is (see Note on v.5). Comparison of v.6 and 37:20 suggests that the king's prayer there was based on his word here as well as on the oracle given in 37:6 – 7.

7 – 8 Here is another sign with messianic significance (v.7; cf. 7:10 – 17), for Hezekiah's dynasty is the Messiah's line. This is given in support of the word (cf. 37:30 – 32 and comment there). The account in 2 Kings 20 is somewhat longer at this point and includes a discussion about a detail of the sign. Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out that the briefer account here is not falsification but a focus on the crucial factor — a sign is given by God.The sun was about to set on Hezekiah's life, but now it will return for a time, thus prolonging the day (v.8). Attempts to explain this day scientifically or to relate it to some calendrical adjustment — perhaps in conjunction with Joshua's long day (Jos 10) — have not been convincing to students of science or chronology. It is best to admit we do not yet know the explanation but to accept the testimony of God's word to the miracle.

9 – 14 The parallel account in 2 Kings does not include this psalm. It is true, as Oswalt (in loc.) points out, that the psalm does not fit any of the commonly accepted forms. This is not a problem, however, for M. Dahood, writing on Psalm 36 (*Psalms* [Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1970], 1:218) points out that there are several different genres within it and says, "The coexistence of three literary types within a poem of thirteen verses points up the limitations of the form-critical approach to the Psalter." Writers such as Westermann, while recognizing the value of form-critical classification, tend to underline the individual character of each psalm. The most important likeness to David that any of his successors could have is a likeness in piety, and it is this that is highlighted when kings are compared with David in the books of Kings. The importance of Hezekiah in Isaiah and the presence of a psalm by him here

reminds us that, like David, he has a concern for the music of the temple (2Ch 29:25 – 30).

Verses 10 – 14 are retrospective, for the king is recalling his thoughts during his illness (v.9) by the device of self-quotation. A backward glance at a predicament before divine intervention can be a great stimulus to praise. Verse 10 assumes that a human being could normally look forward to a certain life span. The reference to "gates of death" conveys an image of Sheol (so NIV mg.; see Note at 14:15) as a city of the dead. To "see the LORD" (v.11) probably means appearing in his presence in the temple (cf., e.g., 1:12; Ps 42:2; 63:2). The king shows a right sense of priorities when he places this before the continuance of human fellowship.

After the tent illustration, Hezekiah alludes to the weaver's rolling up and cutting of a finished length of cloth from his loom (v.12). As Clements (in loc.) says, "The images are of objects which suddenly disappear from their expected place." The recurrent statement in vv.12 – 13 (*mîyôm ʿad-laylâ,* lit., "from day to night") probably conveys the same idea of suddenness — in the morning perfect health, in the evening death. Verse 13 seems to refer to a night spent in prayer, only to be ended in the morning when God suddenly falls on Hezekiah like a lion.

Here is an almost Job-like appeal to God against God (v.14). The varied cries of Palestine's birds express the nature of Hezekiah's many cries to God, now quiet, now shrill, now mournful. The reference to Hezekiah's eyes conveys a picture of concentrated appeal to God, and to him alone.

15 – 20 Now the psalm's tone changes dramatically (cf. Ps 22:21 – 22). The question that opens v.15 implies that the king feels no words of his can do justice to his gratitude to God for his great deliverance. In God word and deed always perfectly correspond. The king has learned humility from this experience, for through it he now recognizes that someone else controls the course of his life and the day of his death. The words "by such things men live" (v.16) probably refer to the words and deeds of God mentioned in v.15. We may perhaps see the "benefit" of v.17 as his new understanding of God's gracious, forgiving love, expressed in his deliverance from death.

Young (in loc.) rightly interprets v.18 in terms of Hezekiah's sense of forgiveness. Thus, his statements are to be understood not as absolute affirmations about the human state after death — as though, Sadducee-like, Hezekiah believes fellowship with God will not surmount death. The point is rather that sin merits death. The deeper significance of death cries out for the forgiveness of sin, which Hezekiah has himself now experienced. His restoration to health has this as its crowning bless-ing: he can give thanks to God (v.19). Verse 19b, rendered literally, says, "Father tells children about your faithfulness." If he means literal children rather than Israel as the children of God, this strengthens the view expressed above (see comment on vv.2 – 3) that his concern partly lies in his lack of progeny (see 53:10; cf. also Ps 22:30 – 31).

Verse 20 reminds us that Hezekiah encouraged the singing of the songs of David and Asaph in the temple worship (2Ch 29:25 – 30). The NT also shows the glad awareness of salvation being joyfully expressed in song (Rev 5:9 – 10).

21 – 22 These verses occur in 2 Kings 20 immediately after the promise that the city will be delivered from the king of Assyria. Second Kings does not contain Hezekiah's psalm, so it would be most natural if the writer, dependent on the book of Isaiah for the facts, has inserted these verses in his narrative at this point. Most critics assume the verses here have been dislocated from their correct position earlier in the chapter. Young (in loc.), following Alexander (in loc.), vigorously contests this. The words of Isaiah and Hezekiah have perhaps been recorded here to satisfy the reader's natural queries about the means of healing and the reason for the sign. Hezekiah is not criticized for requesting a sign. After all, as several commentators point out, Isaiah's two prophecies about him in vv.1 and 5 may have puzzled him by their contrast. He seeks not so much confirmation as clarification.

NOTES

5 If Hezekiah died in 686 BC (cf. *ZPEB*, 3:149 – 52), this incident must be dated about 703 – 701.The former is the probable date of Merodach-Baladan's embassy and the latter the date of Sennacherib's threat to Jerusalem.

8 It is often assumed that the Hebrew מַעֲלוֹת (*maʿălôt*, "steps") refers here to a

sundial in the palace courtyard. There is, however, no other instance of its use in this sense, and it probably simply refers to a series of steps and to the play of the shadow of the sun on them.

11 The NIV follows the MT with its repeated יָהּ יָהּ (*yâ yâ*, “the LORD, the LORD”), but the LXX and some Hebrew manuscripts have a single *Yahweh* , which could be correct. The MT reads חָדֶל (*ḥādel*, “cessation”),which the NIV emends, with most scholars, to חֶדֶל (*ḥādel*, “world”), assuming a simple scribal error.

14Two of the birds can be identified with fair certainty, but the עָגוּר (*ʿāgûr*, “thrush”) presents problems. It could also be a crane.

15This contains problems of both translation and interpretation. It could represent the conclusion of Hezekiah’s lament, with God’s speech and action related to Hezekiah’s sickness rather than his cure. The LXX assumes a somewhat different Hebrew text, only part of which corresponds with 1QIsa. The NIV makes good sense of the MT, which should be retained.

16 Once again the LXX presupposes textual differences. Young (in loc.) gives a literal translation of the MT as follows: “Lord, upon them they live, and as to everything in them is the life of my spirit, and thou wilt recover me and make me live.” The NIV makes a brave attempt to render this in good English, although a little differently.

21 Evidence from Ras Shamra shows that figs were used in healing (cf. C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* [Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1949], 129). Like the NT use of oil (e.g., Jas 5:14), the use of means was not reckoned incompatible with divine healing.

C. Envoys from and Exile to Babylonia (39:1 – 8)

OVERVIEW

This brief chapter is important, for it serves, in the overall plan of the book, to set the scene for the chapters that follow. These chapters — enigmatic to the ordinary reader prior to the reference to Babylon in ch. 43 and perhaps even before the dramatic mention of Cyrus at the close of ch. 44 — become clear as to their setting when seen to presuppose the fulfillment of the prophecy given in this chapter, which therefore fills an indispensable function.

This chapter, perhaps more than any other in the book of Isaiah, tends to reveal the basic presuppositions of commentators. Many place it early in the sixth century and do so on the sole ground that it purports to predict events that took place then. Thus this raises the question, Does supernatural prediction really occur? Behind this is an even deeper question, What is God's relationship to his creation and to the human race?

1 At that time Merodach-Baladan son of Baladan king of Babylon sent Hezekiah letters and a gift,
because he had heard of his illness and recovery. 2 Hezekiah received the envoys gladly and showed
them what was in his storehouses — the silver, the gold, the spices, the fine oil, his entire armory and
everything found among his treasures. There was nothing in his palace or in all his kingdom that
Hezekiah did not show them.

3 Then Isaiah the prophet went to King Hezekiah and asked, "What did those men say, and where
did they come from?"

"From a distant land," Hezekiah replied."They came to me from Babylon."

4 The prophet asked, "What did they see in your palace?"

"They saw everything in my palace," Hezekiah said. "There is nothing among my treasures that I
did not show them."

5 Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the LORD Almighty: 6 The time will surely
come when everything in your palace, and all that your fathers have stored up until this day, will be
carried off to Babylon. Nothing will be left, says the LORD. 7 And some of your descendants, your
own fl esh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs in
the palace of the king of Babylon."

8"The word of the LORD you have spoken is good," Hezekiah replied. For he thought, "There
will be peace and security in my lifetime."

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Merodach-Baladan, known to secular history as Marduk-aplu-idinna, an Aramean, was king of Babylon from 721 – 709 BC and again for a brief spell of nine months in 703 BC (see *ZPEB*, 4:191 – 92). Babylon had known years of greatness before and, though now eclipsed by Assyria, was to be great again. Merodach-Baladan's brief success in throwing off the Assyrian yoke was an earnest of this.

There was, of course, a political motive for sending his deputation to Hezekiah (v.1). According to the Chronicler, whose comments on Hezekiah are generally positive but who also has criticisms of him, the envoys came to ask Hezekiah about the miraculous sign that had occurred in his land (2Ch 32:31), but this does not mean there were no other motives for their visit. This could have taken place during the closing years of his first period of rule; but, in view of the time references in 38:5 and this verse, it seems likely that it was in 703, only two years before Jerusalem's deliverance from Sennacherib.

The envoys are given a grand tour of the palace and the kingdom (v.2). Hezekiah's glad reception of them is perhaps due to a desire to be involved in concerted action against Assyria, the display of his wealth showing he has something to offer as a potential ally.

3 – 4 Isaiah's inquiry (v.3) may be a preliminary to the coming of a message from God to Hezekiah, so that he will understand its significance. More likely, however, it is to emphasize to the king the reason for the prophecy. His conduct has been unbelieving and probably proud as well. These are the two sins most often condemned by the prophet. Hezekiah, like many a modern politician, ignores the first question (the men have probably proposed an alliance, and Hezekiah knows exactly what Isaiah would say to that!), although he does answer the second.

5 – 7 "The LORD Almighty," the title of God Isaiah uses in v.5 (see comment on 1:24), lays emphasis on the Lord's infinite resources employed in his acts of power. Hezekiah's own resources may have seemed great to him, but the Lord's are far greater; and they will be used in judgment against Hezekiah's people through the Babylonians.

Isaiah's reference to Hezekiah's fathers (v.6) is perhaps a rebuke to his lack of a sense of stewardship. Through his folly, what others have gathered will be lost. His conduct has been irresponsible in terms of both his ancestors and his descendants (v.7), for the latter will suffer in the ensuing judgment. There is probably another reason why his fathers and descendants are mentioned. The OT recognizes solidarity in sin and the coming of judgment when a group's iniquity has come to full expression (Ge 15:16; Da 8:23; cf. Mt 23:32; 1Th 2:16). It is not until Jeremiah, in the days of Babylon's new empire, that the sin of Judah's dynasty reaches the point of no return.

Yet even in the midst of this declaration of coming judgment there is a hint of a continuing gracious purpose, as so often occurs in the stern messages of Isaiah to Judah. Probably Hezekiah is at this time without male progeny (see comment on 38:2 – 3). Also, the phrase "some of your descendants" leaves room for hope. Moreover, Oswalt (in loc.) thinks one purpose of including this chapter is to indicate the weaknesses in Hezekiah and so to show that he is not the Messiah, on the assumption perhaps that in 7:14 it was Hezekiah who was in view; instead, he is a type of the coming Messiah, not as himself that exalted person (see comments on 7:14 in Oswalt and in the present commentary).

8 Hezekiah's acknowledgment that God's word is good probably includes a recognition that the judgment is appropriate — because deserved — and that it is not altogether unmixed with grace. Should we condemn his final statement as selfish and unfeeling? Probably not. It is more likely to be a thankful recognition that God has not dealt with him personally to the measure of what he deserves.

VII. The Sole Sovereignty and Sure Promises of the Lord (40:1 – 48:22)

OVERVIEW

To move from ch. 39 to ch. 40 is to enter a part of the book (chs. 40 – 66) that has produced more scholarly literature than any other part of the OT. The number of different views as to authorship, structure, and other related matters of

introduction is bewildering, and the debate as to the nature of the Servant Songs (see comment on 42:1 – 4) and the identity of “my servant” shows no sign of abating. See the Introduction for fuller discussion of these issues.The view taken here is that the whole book is the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem and that chs. 40 – 66 consist of oracles given to him by the Spirit of inspiration, thus enabling him to live in spirit in a future day so that he can be the vehicle of God’s message to the people of that day.

Many scholars — whether or not they recognize the integrity of the book — have noted that chs. 40 – 48 have a certain unity to them. Kidner, 611, has written:

> We emerge in 40:1 in a different world from Hezekiah’s, immersed in the situation foretold in 39:5 – 8, which he was so thankful to escape. Nothing is said of the intervening century and a half; we wake, so to speak, on the far side of the disaster, impatient for the end of captivity. In chs. 40 – 48 liberation is in the air; there is the persistent promise of a new exodus, with God at its head; there is the approach of a conqueror, eventually disclosed as Cyrus, to break Babylon open; there is also a new theme unfolding, to reveal the glory of the call to be a servant and a light to the nations. All this is expressed with a soaring, exultant eloquence, in a style heard only fitfully hitherto (cf., e.g., 35:1 – 10; 37:26f.), but now sustained so as to give its distinctive tone to the remaining chapters of the book.

K. P. Darr, 165, says that a sequential reader “fully accustomed to sudden shifts in literary style, subject, and tone, does not wonder that the prose narrative of Isaiah 39 gives way to poetry in ch. 40. The two chapters are closely linked, for Isaiah 39 is vital to a coherent construal of chapters 40 – 55.”

A. Good News for Jerusalem (40:1 – 11)

OVERVIEW

How much of ch. 40 is the introduction to chs. 40 – 55? Is it the whole chapter or just verses 1 – 11? Oswalt (in loc.) argues for the whole chapter because the two main questions addressed in chs. 40 – 48 are God's desire and ability to save, and these are addressed in the chapter as a whole. In some ways the question raises the same kind of issue we meet in John's gospel, where either the whole of ch. 1 or simply vv.1 – 18 form the introduction. Perhaps in both cases we might say that the first section has a special introductory character but that its theme is strongly echoed in the remainder of the chapter.

Verses 1 – 11 undoubtedly set the tone for chs. 40 – 48. The prophet responds to the command of God to bring a message of comfort to his people. Oswalt also makes the point, however, that there are important themes of chs. 40 – 48 that are not touched on in the introduction, such as witness, the Servant, and the salvation of the nations.

1 Comfort, comfort my people,
    says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
    and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
    that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
    double for all her sins.
3 A voice of one calling:
"In the desert prepare
    the way for the LORD;
make straight in the wilderness
    a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be raised up,
    every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
    the rugged places a plain.
5 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
    and all mankind together will see it.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
6 A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"
"All men are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.
7 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the LORD blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.
8 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God stands forever."
9 You who bring good tidings to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and his arm rules for him.
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.
11 He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 "No sooner the message of disaster (39:5 – 7) than the message of comfort (40:1 – 2)" Motyer (1993, in loc.)! The imperatives here are plural, possibly addressing the prophets generally, though this passage shows us simply the response of Isaiah. Such a command must have been a great joy for the prophet to hear insofar as he has been fulfilling such a discouraging commission as given in 6:9 – 13. Imperative or vocatival repetition is a characteristic of emotional speech (cf., e.g., Ge 22:11; 1Sa 18:33; Ps 22:1) and occurs frequently in Isaiah, especially in the chapters that follow (cf. also Isa 29:1).

The phrase "my people" (v.1) itself suggests either comfort or rebuke rather than judgment. In close connection with "your God," as here, it is a covenantal term. Baltzer (in loc.) underscores the fact that "people" (*ʿam*) has overtones of kinship and that this is highly appropriate in a part of the book where God is

portrayed as the gō'ēl (the Kinsman Redeemer; GK 1457) of his people (41:14; 43:14; 44:6; et al.). The God of Israel will come to rescue those who have become his own "kin" through election and covenant.

In v.2 the prophet addresses not the exiles but Jerusalem, as both the context and the use of Hebrew feminine verbs in the personification of the city make clear. God's saving deeds in Babylon are to make possible a new Jerusalem that will emerge from the ashes of the old. Darr, 165, points out that Isaiah 40 – 66 contains more female imagery than any other comparable block of text in the Hebrew Bible.The NIV's "hard service" takes ṣābā',m not in its usual military sense as "warfare" but as it is used in Job (e.g., Job 7:1). The hard ser vice, of course, is the Babylonian exile. The proclamation of forgiveness, as Young (in loc.) says, "is the first intimation of the truth to be more fully revealed in the fifty-third chapter."

"Double" appears to many commentators to be hyperbole, used to impress on the people that the chastisement of the exile is really over, although some think it refers to the combination of debt and compensation; Baltzer (in loc.), interpreting it through 47:8 – 9; 51:17 – 20; 54:1 – 4, thinks it refers to Jerusalem's widowhood and childlessness. All three interpretations seem possible, but the third is particularly attractive because of the way it sets this verse in its wider context.

Motyer (1993, in loc.) points out that the verb "paid for" in the passive voice is a technical term used elsewhere only in Leviticus 1:4; 7:18; 19:7; 22:23, 25, 27; that all these passages are concerned with blood sacrifice; and that the Servant of the Lord is revealed in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 as a sacrificial offering utterly satisfying to the God in whose service his sacrifice is made.

3 – 5 Like other prophets, Isaiah was given visions (1:1), but he also hears words. An unidentified voice calls (v.3). John the Baptist, to whom the NT applies the words, is prepared to be such an unidentified voice (Jn 1:19 – 23). What matters is the ultimate origin and the content of the word of God, not its channel. Isaiah 35:8 – 10 spoke of a highway for the returning exiles, implying perhaps that it will traverse the desert (35:1). This is made clear now; and, because it represents God's purpose for his people, it is called his highway.

The verb *pānâ* (“prepare”) introduces the idea of the removal of obstructions, which is spelled out further in v.4. The whole concept is, of course, figurative, most commentators taking it as a declaration in dramatic fashion that the Lord will let nothing stand in the way of the exiles’ return. Motyer (1999, in loc.) and Oswalt (in loc.) both take it to be God himself coming across the desert to the help of his people (cf. Dt 33:2; Ps 68:4, 7).Young (in loc.) interprets it of the people’s repentance rather than their journey home to Zion. No doubt coming back often has dual significance in Isaiah, combining the physical and the spiritual (see comment on 7:3), though the verb “to return” does not occur in our present image. John the Baptist’s call to repentance does not settle the matter, for the NT fulfillment of an OT passage often moves the concept from the physical to the spiritual. It seems best to consider it physical here but with possible spiritual overtones.

Smart (in loc.) is surely correct when he lays all the emphasis on God rather than on the exiles. What is in prospect is an amazing new revelation of the glory of the Lord, not now for Israel only (e.g., in her temple), but for all humankind (v.5; cf. 60:1 – 3). Isaiah’s tendency to add some emphatic statement such as “for the mouth of the LORD has spoken” (v.6; cf. 9:7; 37:32) anticipates Christ’s “truly I say to you.”

6 – 8 The prophet hears a voice again, and the absence of the definite article suggests it is a different one. Could these be angelic voices speaking on behalf of Yahweh, perhaps like the various created beings that speak in the book of the Revelation (e.g., Rev 5:2; 6:1; 7:2, 13)? This is not impossible, although, if one discounts the seraphim in Isaiah. 6, there is only one explicit reference to an angel in the book (63:9). Whoever they are, of course, like the prophets, they speak Yahweh’s message, not their own. There is no suggestion of consultation between Yahweh and other beings (see comment on 6:8).

In response to his request, the Lord follows up with the message Isaiah is to give (v.6). Human beings who are self-sufficient do not respond eagerly to good news from God. The letter to the Romans expounds humanity’s need before setting out in its fullness God’s answer (cf. also 2Co 2:16; 3:4 – 6). The exile itself must have made the people aware of their frailty. What unites all human enterprises is their transience. Flowers may look beautiful, but where will they be tomorrow?

God is the one enduring reality in a constantly changing world, and he has himself designed it so. Christ's assertion that the entire universe will prove less enduring than his words (Mk 13:31) may owe something to this passage. The following chapters lay great stress on the enduring word of God. It is understandable, on the basis of a threefold division of the book, that Baltzer should see this passage and 55:10 – 11 as an example of inclusio, binding together the beginning and the ending of "Deutero-Isaiah," but we should note that there is an important reference to God's word also in 66:2.

The "breath of the LORD" may be a reference to the Holy Spirit, but in this context, where the focus is on plant life, it may also refer to the effect of the wind, which, more lowly as it is, is nevertheless God's agent as well.

9 – 11 Although the reading in the NIV's text of v.9 is possible, the marginal rendering ("O Zion, bringer of good tidings, / go up on a high mountain. / O Jerusalem, bringer of good tidings") seems much more likely, for the imperatives are feminine, appropriate with "the daughter of Zion" (1:8 et al.). It is Zion who first hears the good news of her God's return and is commanded to climb, like a herald, to some elevated place to proclaim the news to her satellite towns. Likewise, the NT's good news spreads from Jerusalem to all Judea before going out to all the earth (Ac 1:8).

From v.3 to v.8 the reader has anticipated the coming of the Lord; he is now described and depicted, with the reiterated call to attention —"see" (v.10).The NIV obscures the fact that v.9 also uses this word: "See your God!" There is a perfect balance of strength and tenderness here."His arm" suggests exodus power (Dt 4:34), appropriate in relation to a return from exile, and due to be most wonderfully expounded later (see 53:1).

Some commentators take "his reward" and "his recompense" to relate to the fact that only God can be rewarded for what has happened, because he has done it, while others take the words to mean that he comes as the righteous judge.The former is possible; and we might expect the latter to find some confirmation in the context, but this seems lacking. Whybray (in loc.) may well be correct when he says, "These words . . . refer to the spoils of victory; but in this case the spoils are the rescued exiles, who are in a sense God's 'captives.'"

All this power is used with great tenderness on behalf of God's people (v.11), leading them back from Babylon to the fold in Jerusalem. The NIV's "Sovereign LORD" (for Adonai Yahweh) in v.10 underscores the idea of a strong and tender Shepherd-King. M. Z. Brettler ("Incomparable Metaphors for YHWH in Isaiah 40 – 66," *JSOT* 78 [1998]: 97 – 120), dealing with "contradictory" metaphors that describe Yahweh in chs. 40 – 55, writes:

> .. . the central combination concerns the axis of power with that of concerned care.. .. Though these different elements, and the metaphors that evoke them, such as king, warrior, shepherd, mother, father and husband, do not mix on the literal level, once we understand how metaphors function, we begin to see how successfully they mix as metaphors to create the prophets' notion of YHWH.

NOTE

7 The words "Surely the people are grass" are absent from the LXX, and in 1QIsa they are peculiarly situated between the lines and the margin, so they may not be original. Baltzer (in loc.), however, comments that the vocabulary is Deutero-Isaiah's own; he favors retention.

B. God the Incomparable (40:12 – 31)

OVERVIEW

All authentic theology rests on the revealed doctrine of God, and Isaiah has a majestic view of God, which he expounds in this and the following section of his prophecy, where the God of Israel is described as the God of creation (40:12 – 31) and then the Lord of history (41:1 – 29). These two great passages can be taken together as a development of the words of proclamation in v.9: "Here is your God!" The first also expounds more fully the description of an all-powerful yet tender ShepherdKing in vv.10 – 11, for the incomparable majesty of God set forth in vv.12 – 26 leads into an assurance that he will give strength to his frail people.

Old Testament form criticism has usually identified the material in this passage as a series of disputations taking their form from the argument between two people in which there is some appeal to common ground. Here God reasons with his people on the basis not of new disclosures about him but of truths they are already familiar with. Certainly this passage is the locus classicus of the rhetorical argument in Scripture (cf. also the strong and explicit appeal to reason in 1:18 – 20). Yet we should not overlook that the passage is reminiscent of another form, and some scholars, such as C. Westermann (*Praise and Lament in the Psalms* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981], 127, n. 81), refer to it as consisting of hymns (in his terminology, "descriptive praise"). The emotion of worship here is unmistakable (we might say the same of Ge 1) and, for the spiritually sensitive reader, infectious.

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?
13 Who has understood the mind of the LORD,
or instructed him as his counselor?
14 Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?

Who was it that taught him knowledge
or showed him the path of understanding?
15 Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;
they are regarded as dust on the scales;
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.
16 Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.
17 Before him all the nations are as nothing;
they are regarded by him as worthless
and less than nothing.
18 To whom, then, will you compare God?
What image will you compare him to?
19 As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold
and fashions silver chains for it.
20 A man too poor to present such an offering
selects wood that will not rot.
He looks for a skilled craftsman
to set up an idol that will not topple.
21 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?
22 He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.
23 He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.
24 No sooner are they planted,
no sooner are they sown,
no sooner do they take root in the ground,
than he blows on them and they wither,
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.
25 “To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.
26 Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?
He who brings out the starry host one by one,
and calls them each by name.
Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.
27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?

28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
31 but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

COMMENTARY

12 – 17 It is interesting to compare the mighty questions here with those God put to Job in Job 38 – 41. In both places God asserts his sole "godhood." The use of the magnificent anthropomor-phisms in v.12 is so natural after the picture of God as a shepherd (v.11). Such anthropomorphisms do not, as seems to have been thought during the intertestamental period, reduce God to the human level. They simply give vividness to the theological truth of his personality. These questions do not demean God; rather, they magnify him in the eyes of the hearer. R. N. Whybray, in his detailed monograph on vv.13 – 14 (*The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah XI.13 – 14* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971], 10), says, "It is clear that the hypothetical situation here envisaged, only to be denied, is one in which there exists some person or being who gave Yahweh the benefit of his wisdom and experience. This is emphasized by the piling up of verbs meaning 'to teach' with Yahweh as object."

In v.13 the LXX understood *rûah*. (usually "spirit"; GK 8120) to mean "mind" (cf. NIV; also cf. LXX in passages such as 1Ch 28:12; Eze 20:32). Whybray (*Heavenly Counsellor*, 10 – 13) argues that this is its probable meaning here. Against this, however, must be set the fact that this passage is about God's creative power, and Genesis 1:2 gives the Spirit a place in this work. We must remember that the Jews in Babylon were to be in the midst of an impressive polytheism. Soon the prophet will commence his attack on idolatry (v.18).

Whybray's thesis is that this attack is already introduced here; for — unlike Marduk, the supreme Babylonian deity — the Lord, in his creative work (v.14), takes no advice from other gods, because there are none.

Near-Eastern marketplace commerce would take no account of a minute water-drop in the measuring bucket or a little dust on the scales when meat or fruit was weighed (v.15).This passage implies the consummate ease of Yahweh's control of history as well as of nature. He had given a sacrificial system but was not, like Babylon's deities, tied to it; for the most impressive forestland known to the Near East was inadequate to furnish fuel or sacrificial animals for a worthy offering to him (v.16).

18 – 20 The reference to animal sacrifice — visible offerings made to an invisible God (v.18) — leads Isaiah to speak of the spectacular folly of idolatry. In a way elaborated later (see esp. 44:12 – 20), he stresses the selection of the best materials and the finest human skills (v.19); but there is a touch of prophetic irony about the stated purpose of all this: "to set up an idol that will not topple" (v.20). As Baltzer (in loc.) says, "the text is meant to raise a laugh, for the enterprise described is so ridiculous in the light of all that the living God is."

21 – 24 Here God is like a father, gently yet firmly chiding his children for their failure to see the relevance to their situation of God's disclosure in history and nature that he is sovereign (v.21; cf. Mt 16:8 – 12). Baltzer (in loc.) remarks, "In our modern categories we distinguish between nature and history. Here in this text it is the *unity* of the world that is emphatically adhered to. The one world corresponds to the one God. God establishes its spatial and temporal continuum."

Knight (in loc.) considers "the beginning" to be a technical term in Deutero-Isaiah (cf. 41:26; 46:10, although 48:16 — rendered "the first announcement" — seems an exception) signifying God's act of redemption in the days of Moses. Thus, here "from the beginning" and "since the earth was founded" are not synonyms, for the second precedes the first. But if, however, they are synonyms, could this be an allusion to Genesis 1, a chapter with so many theological links with this one?

God is supreme over the earth and all its people; he utilizes the majestic

heavens he has created to suggest, through their overarching form (v.22), that the universe is a home for him; and he allows no one, no matter how great, to further personal ambitions without limit (v.23). His absolute control over all human life is unchallenged. Verses 23 – 24 represent a great truth, of course — not only about individual rulers, but also about world empires.

25 – 26 Brettler ("Incomparable Metaphors for YHWH in Isaiah 40 – 66," *JSOT* 78 [1998]: 97 – 98) comments on the "wonderful irony" of v.25: "This is one of the Hebrew Bible's strongest statements concerning the incomparability of YHWH, yet it is found within a literary corpus which is particularly rich with comparisons for YHWH." Of course, the issue in this passage is either the comparison of YHWH with the gods of the nations, or else, as Brettler, 120, thinks, whether a single comparative metaphor or simile is adequate to describe him.

Verses 18 – 20 contrasted God with the idols that were all too common in Babylonia. Now the same question introduces an implicit religious contrast with the astral deities that dominated Babylonia (v.26). This passage is antimythological; for it asserts that the heavenly bodies, far from being deities in their own right, are simply the creatures of the one Creator-God, who is also Israel's Holy One. He orders their pattern, knows each in its distinctiveness, and upholds them all in their being (v.26; cf. Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). All this had, of course, been revealed to God's people from early times (cf. v.21) in the opening chapters of Genesis.

27 – 31 The prophet's majestic view of God — stemming, at least in part, from the inaugural vision of ch. 6 — is now brought to bear on the people's despondency. The name "Jacob" (v.27) occurs about forty times in Isaiah, about two-thirds of the occurrences being in chs. 40 – 66. It suggests the unworthiness of the chosen people, but it also brings to mind here the ancestor's experience in the story of his descendants (cf. Mal 3:6); for Jacob, too, had been in exile in (northern) Mesopotamia as a result of his own folly. As God had told Jacob (Ge 31:13), he is now telling his progeny to return to the Promised Land.The language used here suggests that the people were bringing God down to their own level, thinking him either forgetful (v.27) or tired (v.28) — perhaps because their long history of folly seemed to be never-ending.

The closing verses assert that the God who upholds the stars (v.26) also supports his weary people (vv.29 – 31). Those who found tiring the journey to Jerusalem from other parts of the land are given strength for it by God (Ps 84:5, 7). The people in Babylon must travel much farther but can exchange their little strength for his omnipotence. The verb used in v.31a suggests an exchange of strength. The threefold description forms a climax, not its opposite; for the exceptional flying and the occasional running do not stress, as does the constant walking, that dependence on divine grace should itself be constant.

NOTES

12 – 31 Westermann (in loc.) brings out the fact that this passage is steeped in the language of the Psalms.

Eaton, 43, lists the following affinities: v.16 and Psalm 50:8 – 13; vv.19 – 20 and Psalm 115:4 – 8; v.22 and Psalms 104:2; 19:4; v.23 and Psalm 33:10, 15 – 16; v.25 and Psalm 89:6 – 8; v.26 and Psalms 147:4; 8:4; v.27 and Psalm 44:24; vv.29, 31 and Psalms 33:16 – 17; 103:5.

17 The MT's מֵאָפֶס (*mēʾepes*) is often amended to כְּאָפֶס (*kʾepes*) with 1QIsa and the LXX, so reading "like nothing" instead of "from nothing." Either is possible.

22 The reference to "the circle of the earth" is unique, but see the somewhat similar phrases of Job 26:10; Proverbs 8:27.The expression probably refers to the horizon, although we cannot be certain. Oswalt (in loc.) thinks it more likely that the reference is to the vault of the heavens (Job 22:14). Watts (in loc.) mentions some variants in the LXX MSS.

23 Compare Numbers 13:33 for the reference to grasshoppers.

26 Regarding "he who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name," Whybray (in loc.) says that this "suggests a general marshalling his troops and giving them their orders . . . none dares fail to be 'on parade.' "

C. God the Lord of History for His People (41:1 – 29)

OVERVIEW

Smart (in loc.) opens his exposition of this chapter by saying, "The background against which to read ch. 41 is that which has been created for the reader by ch. 40. If we follow this principle, we permit the prophet himself to be the primary interpreter of his own thought, and instead of prejudging the historical situation, we let it emerge bit by bit as the chapters open out the one from the other." This is a wise comment, even though we differ somewhat from Smart on important exegetical points in this chapter.

1 "Be silent before me, you islands!
Let the nations renew their strength!
Let them come forward and speak;
let us meet together at the place of judgment.
2 "Who has stirred up one from the east,
calling him in righteousness to his service?
He hands nations over to him
and subdues kings before him.
He turns them to dust with his sword,
to windblown chaff with his bow.
3 He pursues them and moves on unscathed,
by a path his feet have not traveled before.
4 Who has done this and carried it through,
calling forth the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD — with the first of them
and with the last — I am he."
5 The islands have seen it and fear;
the ends of the earth tremble.
They approach and come forward;
6 each helps the other
and says to his brother, "Be strong!"
7 The craftsman encourages the goldsmith,
and he who smooths with the hammer
spurs on him who strikes the anvil.
He says of the welding, "It is good."
He nails down the idol so it will not topple.
8 "But you, O Israel, my servant,

Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,
9 I took you from the ends of the earth,
from its farthest corners I called you.
I said, ‘You are my servant’;
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
10 So do not fear, for I am with you;
do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
11 “All who rage against you
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;
those who oppose you
will be as nothing and perish.
12 Though you search for your enemies,
you will not find them.
Those who wage war against you
will be as nothing at all.
13 For I am the LORD, your God,
who takes hold of your right hand
and says to you, Do not fear;
I will help you.
14 Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob,
O little Israel,
for I myself will help you,” declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.
15 “See, I will make you into a threshing sledge,
new and sharp, with many teeth.
You will thresh the mountains and crush them,
and reduce the hills to chaff.
16 You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.
But you will rejoice in the LORD
and glory in the Holy One of Israel.
17 2“The poor and needy search for water,
but there is none;
their tongues are parched with thirst.
But I the LORD will answer them;
I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.
18 I will make rivers flow on barren heights,
and springs within the valleys.
I will turn the desert into pools of water,
and the parched ground into springs.
19 I will put in the desert
the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive.
I will set pines in the wasteland,
the fir and the cypress together,

20 so that people may see and know,
may consider and understand,
that the hand of the LORD has done this,
that the Holy One of Israel has created it.
21 “Present your case,” says the LORD.
“Set forth your arguments,” says Jacob’s King.
22 2“Bring in your idols to tell us
what is going to happen.
Tell us what the former things were,
so that we may consider them
and know their final outcome.
Or declare to us the things to come,
23 tell us what the future holds,
so we may know that you are gods.
Do something, whether good or bad,
so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.
24 But you are less than nothing
and your works are utterly worthless;
he who chooses you is detestable.
25 “I have stirred up one from the north, and he comes —
one from the rising sun who calls on my name.
He treads on rulers as if they were mortar,
as if he were a potter treading the clay.
26 Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know,
or beforehand, so we could say, ‘He was right’?
No one told of this,
no one foretold it,
no one heard any words from you.
27 I was the first to tell Zion, ‘Look, here they are!’
I gave to Jerusalem a messenger of good tidings.
28 I look but there is no one —
no one among them to give counsel,
no one to give answer when I ask them.
29 See, they are all false!
Their deeds amount to nothing;
their images are but wind and confusion.

COMMENTARY

1 It is customary for most commentators to dub this the beginning of a trial speech, in which — as in 1:2 — the scene is a courtroom. We may accept this, of course, if we see it as a purely rhetorical device. In fact, in his dealings with humans, God sustains a multiplicity of legal roles; for he is plaintiff, injured

party, judge, lawgiver, and creator, each role finding its place within his many-sided relationship with sinful people. Baltzer, who conceives of Isaiah 40 – 55 as a drama, views the opening reference to silence (comparing it with Ps 115:17), along with the word “dust” in v.2, as an indication that the scene is set in the underworld, but this is by no means a necessary inference from such language.

In ch. 40 the prophet spoke of God in the third person; here God himself speaks. This kind of oscillation often occurs in the chapters that follow.

Although in form v.1 is an address to the nations, the message of the chapter is intended for Israel. The discomfiture of the nations and the demonstration that their gods are impotent is intended to encourage God’s people to trust in him.The repetition of the phrase “renew their strength” (cf. 40:31) may well be ironic. Perhaps as the exiles renew their strength in the true God, so the nations are ironically exhorted to do the same — but in their manmade deities!

2 – 4 The Lord directs attention to himself as the true author of great historical events. But who is the mysterious “one from the east” (v.2)? The Talmud — followed by Calvin and, more recently, Kiss-ane and Torrey — identifies this figure with Abraham. Some modern commentators (e.g., Smart) take him to be personified Israel, while others (e.g., Simon) interpret him messianically. A case can be made for each of these, though each also presents problems. The first two seek support in v.8; the third would provide an introduction to the Servant Songs.

Most commentators, however, take this and v.25 as references to Cyrus, who will be dramatically named at the close of ch. 44. If, as we have argued in the Introduction (p. 447), this prophecy comes from Isaiah of Jerusalem and not from an unknown prophet of the exile, and if, as we will argue (see comment on 44:24 – 28), the revelation of the name of Cyrus is a moment of great prophetic drama, then we should expect some material at an earlier stage to stimulate the expectations of the reader. The references here and in v.25 fulfill this function admirably, and the language of them is fully appropriate when applied to Cyrus.

Abraham’s victory over the kings of the east (Ge 14) was, of course, an earlier example of God’s ability to raise up men on the stage of history to accomplish astounding victories, and the reference to him in v.8 may therefore be

intentionally suggestive. Every historical conqueror raised up by God is, despite his many faults, a faint shadow of the great ultimate Victor, God's Messiah; in him Israel is triumphant and her kingdom enlarged (9:2 – 7).

Cyrus, king of Persia, crossed the Tigris from the east and so entered the Babylonian Empire. He marched swiftly and victoriously against Croesus, king of Lydia, and took his capital, Sardis, in western Asia Minor, having already subdued the Medes in the north (cf. v.25). He can therefore be described as being both from the east and from the north.

The references to "dust" and "chaff " remind us of 17:13; 29:5, and, in a more recent context, 40:24. In fact, this reference to Cyrus is a particular example of the general principle stated in 40:23 – 24.The conquests of Cyrus took him into areas quite unfamiliar to men of his land. The past tenses of these verses should be interpreted as prophetic perfects, describing with vividness what is yet to be.

The great conqueror does not hold the center of the prophetic stage for long, however, for he exists and is referred to only to exalt the name of the Lord. Verse 4 declares the absolute sovereignty of God over history — from its beginning, through all of its generations, and to its end. No wonder he can predict and raise up Cyrus! The word "I" occurs twice in v.4, and Miscall, 102, notes that its freestanding or pleonastic use (not needed except for emphasis) is particularly frequent in chs. 41 – 49. In these chapters God is placing great emphasis on his distinctive person, character, and deeds, and especially on his care of his people.

5 – 7 Places remote from Cyrus's all-conquering route get to hear of what he has done. These verses contain clear allusions to 40:18 – 20. In the cooperative effort of idol-making, the terrified peoples try to find strength (see comment on v.1). The atmosphere of panic in v.5 seems to disappear, for the pagans have found something akin to Dutch courage. How pathetically ineffective is the exhortation "Be strong!" when, as here, fearful and feeble pagans say it to each other, as compared to the strength the true God promises to his people (40:31)! The more gods, the more security — or so they think; but 41:29 shows how vain is such trust, as do later passages even more powerfully. Oswalt (in loc.) comments that it is difficult to avoid the impression that "it is good" (v.7) echoes Genesis 1. "In both cases, the maker sees his product as being good. But there the similarity ends."

8 – 10 In Cyrus's day the people of Israel will be in exile in Babylon, itself under threat and eventually to fall to Cyrus. The fear felt by the remote islands (v.5) will be even more natural in their hearts, but these verses are God's answer to his people's fears. Verses 8 – 9 form a most impressive introduction to the twin exhortations given in v.10, and these are in turn supported within that verse itself by further statements about God.The call to God's people not to be afraid is frequent in Isaiah (7:4; 35:4; 41:13 – 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; 51:7; 54:4) and is an important aspect of his message of comfort in these chapters.

Baltzer (in loc.) sees vv.8 – 13 as an installation passage, similar to those that relate to individual prophets, in which God as Master installs his servant Israel (or confirms the installation) and assures Israel of his call, his strength, his protection, his victory. Certainly vv.8 – 10 (and vv.11 – 16) have some special importance, for the servant theme, which is due to be so outstandingly developed later in this part of Isaiah (i.e., chs. 40 – 55) has its first occurrence here. Everything necessary for effective service has been provided, so that the servant of 42:1ff. can delight the Lord, while the servant of 42:18ff. has no excuse for his failure.

Verses 8 – 10 describe Israel in several encouraging ways. The name "Israel" suggests what God is determined to make of his people (Ge 32:28), while the name "Jacob" indicates that God loves them and has chosen them despite their demerit (see comment on 40:27). Taking them from the ends of the earth is hyperbole that lays stress on the distance of Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan undertaken under God's watchful and caring eye. God chose the people for a purpose of service; and so, of course, they cannot perish without that purpose's fulfillment. These people are loved for the sake of beloved Abraham (cf. Dt 7:7 – 8), to whom God gave great promises (Ge 12:1 – 3; 17:1 – 8; et al.). The strength already promised (40:31) will be theirs. The threefold affirmation of strength comes to its consummation in a reference to the righteous right hand of God, a reminder possibly of the tender strength of the Shepherd-King in 40:9 – 11.

11 – 16 The four statements of vv.11 – 12 reiterate the same fact, the repetition being intended to reinforce the assurance of the fearful. The shame (v.11), of course, is objective. Those who are put to shame sometimes do not feel it as they

ought, because of their moral insensitivity. The call to leave their fear — going out so powerfully in vv.8 – 10 — comes yet again, with a reiteration of some of the earlier statements, but also with other encouragements to trust in their God. The assertion "I am the LORD, your God" (v.13) is perhaps a reminder of the impressive opening of the Decalogue (Ex 20:2) and so is itself suggestive of a new exodus. This is reinforced in v.14 by the use of *go,*m*el*m ("Redeemer"; cf. Ex 6:6; 15:13) and made even more emphatic by the phrase "the Holy One of Israel," which stresses God's special relationship with Israel (cf. Introduction, p. 446) as well as his own distinctive nature.

The description of Israel in v.14 represents the people's self-valuation. Baltzer (in loc.) points out that in the OT the word "worm" is associated with a feeling of revulsion, for worms feed on the dead (14:11; 66:24), and when used of human beings it expresses disdain or contempt (Job 25:6; Ps 22:7).

Verse 15 shows, by contrast, what God's amazing purpose will make them (cf. 2Co 2:16; 3:5 – 6). North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) points out that the worm is a "thresher" of the soil. Threshing with a heavy wooden sledge, with stone or iron teeth, was preliminary to winnowing (v.16), which was carried out on hilltops where the wind could carry away the chaff and allow the grain to fall to the ground. The hills are not now the location of the threshing floor but are themselves threshed! In this way the prophet stresses the powerful instrument God will make of this apparently insignificant people.

If we read the passage in the light of ch. 40, the mountains and hills will be obstacles to the people's release from exile (cf. 40:4). It seems likely, though, that the thought goes beyond this, so that every hindrance to God's ultimate purposes in the international scene is overcome through a judgment executed through Israel. A study of Micah 4:11 – 13, coming from one of Isaiah's contemporaries, supports this exegesis.

17 – 20 An important key to these verses can be easily overlooked. The provision here described is an answer to prayer (v.17; cf. Ps 107:4 – 9).The need for water dominates the passage (cf. 32:6 – 7) and is reminiscent of the experience of Israel in the wilderness (Ex 15:22 – 26; 17:1 – 7; Nu 20:1 – 13). God expresses his total provision for the deepest needs of the returning exiles through the difficult conditions that will beset them. In the most unlikely places,

plentiful supplies will be found, making the whole environment fertile and beautiful (vv.18 – 19).

We may compare and contrast what is said here with the reference to threshing the mountains in vv.15 – 16. That *must* be figurative, for a literal interpretation is inconceivable. Here, however, though the picture is wonderful, it is not outside the scope of possible literal fulfillment. It may be understood as three different but connected fulfillments. In relation to the return from exile it will be figurative, indicating simply that God will supply all that his people need. In relation to the eschatological future, it may represent a literal transformation of the environment of God's people (cf. Ro 8:18 – 22). In the light of the NT, it may also relate symbolically to the complete fulfillment of every spiritual need in Christ (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 53). All this will serve as a revelation of God's power and grace (v.20).

21 – 24 The trial scene of v.1 (see comments there) resumes; but it is now the gods of the nations, not the nations themselves, that are called on for evidence. The first verb in v.22 has no stated object, but the bracketed phrase supplied by the NIV almost certainly expresses the purport of God's call here.The general concept of deity is, in some ways, a simple concept, combining superhuman power and the claim to human worship. But it has many implications, and ability to predict is one of these. This is the basis of the argument here. If the gods of Babylon and other nations have objective reality as deities, they should be able to predict the future and to so interpret history that past and future are seen to be linked in one divinely controlled plan.

The reference to "the former things" and the "things to come," with similar language in 42:9; 43:9, 18 – 19; 46:9 – 10; 48:3, has been variously understood. Oswalt (in loc.), after giving the main interpretations, says, "I suspect that the terminology is fluid, now more specific, now less, depending on the requirements of the argument at hand. Here the reference seems to be more general. The gods are being called on to explain the present on the basis of their interpretation of the past." Verses 23b – 24 turn from challenge to utter scorn (cf. 1Ki 18:27). If prediction is beyond them, let them produce at least some evidence — anything at all — that they exist! They cannot respond; they and their worshipers are beneath contempt. Baltzer (in loc.) makes some interesting comparisons between this passage and Daniel 2.

25 – 29 If, as we have argued (see comment on vv.2 – 4), this and the former passage are both about Cyrus, and if, as we have maintained in the Introduction (pp. 444 – 48), these chapters were written by Isaiah, the context of this passage is most significant. Cyrus was to emerge on the international scene at least a century and a half later. Here, then, is evidence indeed that what the gods of paganism cannot do, the God of Israel can and does do. Here is prediction indeed!

North and east ("the rising sun") are combined (v.25), for, considered from the standpoint of Palestine, Cyrus originated in the east and carried out major conquests in the north. For the meaning of the words "one . . . who calls on my name," see the comment at 45:4.The Babylonian idols might have been expected to predict Cyrus's coming, for his activities would greatly concern the people who worshiped them; but they were silent. The prophet presses home his point with quite exceptional emphasis, for vv.26 – 29 are given over entirely to different ways of underlining the great contrast between the true God, who predicts, and the false gods, who cannot. The coming of Cyrus is, of course, a message of good tidings for Israel (v.27; cf. 40:9), because through him will come the release of the exiles.

NOTES

2 The NIV's text —"calling him in righ teousness to his ser vice" — and margin (also the RSV) —"whom victory meets at every step"— attempt to translate the text as it stands.The key issue is the meaning of צֶדֶק here. "Righteous ness" is its fundamental sense, but it can also mean "victory." Either makes good sense contextually, but the rest of v.2 is controlled by identical sense-rhythm. This inclines me toward the NIV's rendering.

3 The second line can mean that his feet do not touch the ground, thus representing the speed of his conquests (cf. Da 8:5).

8 – 10 North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) writes: "These verses are remarkable for the repetitions of the suffixed endings *i* (6 times) and *ika* (9 times). This is as near to being rhyme as anything in Hebrew poetry. It may not be euphonic but it is nothing if not emphatic, as befits the theme."

14 מְתֵי (*mᵉṯê*, rendered “little” in the NIV) has been much discussed. See esp. A. Schoors, *I Am God Your Savior* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 59 – 61. Textual emendation is unnecessary, and the NIV can be supported by the use of this word with connotations of numerical weakness (see Ge 34:30; Dt 4:27; Jer 44:28; also see discussions in Watts and Oswalt, in loc.).

19 These trees cannot be identified with certainty. See *ZPEB*, 2:563 – 80, North and Baltzer (in loc.).

21 The phrase “Jacob’s King” occurs only here in the OT, but cf. 44:6.

D. The Lord's Servant — the Perfect and the Defective (42:1 – 25)

OVERVIEW

In this part of the book it is not easy to distinguish separate oracles. If, in fact, these chapters were written without prior oral utterance, as some have held (see Introduction, pp. 446 – 47), then no such analysis is even appropriate. If the Servant Songs are the work of the author of the rest of the work, or even of the rest of chs. 40 – 55, this also relieves us of the necessity. Many commentators would agree that both the special nature of these great passages and their literary contexts need to be fully explored. Certainly the whole of the present chapter exhibits in the servant theme a point of unity.

1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him
and he will bring justice to the nations.
2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his law the islands will put their hope."
5 This is what God the LORD says —
he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:
6 "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
8 "I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another

or my praise to idols.

9 See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

10 Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise from the ends of the earth,
you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
you islands, and all who live in them.

11 Let the desert and its towns raise their voices;
let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice.
Let the people of Sela sing for joy;
let them shout from the mountaintops.

12 Let them give glory to the LORD
and proclaim his praise in the islands.

13 The LORD will march out like a mighty man,
like a warrior he will stir up his zeal;
with a shout he will raise the battle cry
and will triumph over his enemies.

14 “For a long time I have kept silent,
I have been quiet and held myself back.
But now, like a woman in childbirth,
I cry out, I gasp and pant.

15 I will lay waste the mountains and hills
and dry up all their vegetation;
I will turn rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.

16 I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them
and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do;
I will not forsake them.

17 But those who trust in idols,
who say to images, ‘You are our gods,’
will be turned back in utter shame.

18 “Hear, you deaf;
look, you blind, and see!

19 Who is blind but my servant,
and deaf like the messenger I send?
Who is blind like the one committed to me,
blind like the servant of the LORD?

20 You have seen many things, but have paid no attention;
your ears are open, but you hear nothing.”

21 It pleased the LORD

for the sake of his righteous ness
to make his law great and glorious.
22 But this is a people plundered and looted,
all of them trapped in pits
or hidden away in prisons.
They have become plunder,
with no one to rescue them;
they have been made loot,
with no one to say, “Send them back.”
23 Which of you will listen to this
or pay close attention in time to come?
24 Who handed Jacob over to become loot,
and Israel to the plunderers?
Was it not the LORD,
against whom we have sinned?
For they would not follow his ways;
they did not obey his law.
25 So he poured out on them his burning anger,
the violence of war.
It enveloped them in fl ames, yet they did not understand;
it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 The term “Servant Songs,” coined by Duhm, is something of a misnomer, for there is no evidence they were ever sung. Not only so, but it has been increasingly recognized that they are meant to be interpreted within their contexts in the book (see esp. T. N. D. Mettinger, *A Farewell to the Servant Songs: A Critical Examination of an Exegetical Axiom* [Lund: Gleerup, 1983]). For a general discussion of these passages — including their number, length, and relationship to their context — see the Introduction, pp. 453 – 62, where the identity of the servant is discussed and a particular interpretation of these passages as a whole expounded.

The NIV obscures the fact that both v.1 and 41:29 commence with the word *hen*m (“behold, see”). Through the prophetic word the reader’s eye is directed away from the pagan gods, with their images, to God’s “servant.”

After reading the previous chapter, the reader is inclined to see an immediate link with the description of Israel in 41:8 – 10, especially as that passage also

follows a condemnation of idolatry. Isaiah 42:6 shows that we cannot, without qualification, identify the servant here with the nation, but we can certainly say that in him the servant mission of Israel finds perfect expression. As so often in this book, a theme is introduced at a comparatively modest level and rises to an expression truly sublime (see comments on 4:2). By reading the following chapters in sequence we are gently led to see “the servant” as a person and as the personal expression of God’s mind for Israel (cf. Mt 12:15 – 21). Baltzer (in loc.) argues (referring also to 41:8 – 16) that two installation accounts suggest two servants. But his suggestion that the servant here is Moses raises more problems than it solves. We note also that 41:9 addresses the servant, whereas 42:1 presents him to others.

Knight (in loc.) points out the special character of the servant as presented here and goes so far as to say that he is “in total contrast to all other servants of God.” As Knight indicates, the Targum on Isaiah interprets the phrase here as “my Messiah,” probably viewing Israel as a whole as collectively a kind of new David, for David is called “my servant” by God in Ezekiel (Eze 34:23 – 24). The words “in whom I delight” (v.1), confirmed by the reference to faithfulness (v.3), immediately suggest that the servant is either Israel idealized or Israel represented by the ideal Israelite; and these words seem to be reflected in Matthew 3:17 in application to Christ.

If the baptism of Jesus was his official initiation into the messianic office, with the descent of the Spirit representing his anointing for the work, the present passage, too, presents Jesus’ ministry in prospect from the perspective of his baptismal inauguration. The gentle nature of his ministry has clearly influenced the picture of the Chris tian worker given in 2 Timothy 2:24 – 26, which, with Acts 13:46 – 48, shows that the NT countenances at least some corporate application of the servant. There are, however, more personal links with the earlier messianic prophecies; for in these the king, anointed by the Spirit, promotes justice (cf. Isa 11:1 – 5; 32:1). Verses 1 and 4 certainly suggest that even if we cannot completely identify the servant with a king, there is a regal aspect to his work.

Already the element of suffering in the servant’s experience, which finds fuller and fuller expression till it achieves dominance in the fourth song (52:13 – 53:12), is gently suggested in v.4. Others, if faced with what he would have to experience, would falter; but his faithfulness sustains him in the pathway of

obedient service. Baltzer (in loc.), commenting on v.1, notes that delight is elsewhere God's response to sacrifice (Lev 1:3; 7:18) but that it is here the response to the person himself. Can we perhaps detect here, then, the first suggestion of a sacrificial destiny for the servant?

5 – 7 Duhm limited the first Servant Song to vv.1 – 4, but comparison with 49:1 – 6 (and also with 61:1 – 3) certainly suggests we should not divide vv.5 – 7 from the first four verses. Baltzer, a major recent commentator, in fact extends his treatment of this passage to the close of v.9. Just as Psalm 2 presents the divine address to the messianic king or to Israel's king as foreshadowing him — almost certainly in the context of his kingly inauguration or enthronement — so here, with the ministry of the servant in prospect, God assures him of divine support as he executes his mission.

As Genesis sets redemption in a context of creation, so the picture of God as Creator and Lord of the whole universe and of human life given in ch. 40 is summarily expressed here. His relationship to the universe (v.5) is suggestive of almighty power. This power is now channeled for the support of his servant in the doing of his will. If we interpret this passage in terms of its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus, it was through his earthly ministry, with its climax in death, that he was "made" a covenant and a light, just as through his sufferings he was perfected in experience for his priestly work (Heb 5:4 – 10).

Verse 6 with its reference to a "covenant for the people" makes us aware of the fact that the servant cannot be simply identified with Israel. He at least represents a group within it, perhaps the faithful remnant (see comments on 4:2), if not an individual. Thus the reader is being gradually educated as to the identity of the true Servant of God, and it should not be missed that this first Servant Song occurs immediately after a passage in which the ability of Israel's God to predict is strongly asserted. The phrase "covenant for the people" implies a structured relationship between God and those already possessing his revelation, while "a light for the Gentiles" suggests the widening of the scope of this revelation. The covenantal reference may be to the new covenant, the special blessings of which are later spelled out in Jeremiah 31:31 – 34. If it is, it may be viewed as confirming the Abrahamic covenant, for that covenant too spoke of a blessing for the nations (cf. Ge 12:1 – 3, et al.).

Grammatically, v.7 could apply both to the people and the Gentiles, but in fact it looks like an exposition of the light-imparting work of the servant. The whole verse can be so understood, for ancient Near Eastern prisons were extremely dark; but of course the verse teaches that he gives liberty as well as light (cf. 61:1 – 2). Freeing captives suggests the conquest of the captors and so kingship (see comment on vv.1 – 4), while the opening of blind eyes and the enlightenment of the Gentiles introduces a prophetic feature into the work of this Spirit-anointed Servant of God.

8 – 9 The great assertion "I am the LORD" (v.8) reminds us of 41:13 (cf. comment there) and so makes another link between the servant and Israel (cf. also v.6 and the promise in 41:13 that God will hold the hand of his people). So the reader, sitting in the school of the prophetic Spirit, learns that though the servant may not simply be Israel, he is closely associated with that people. The further assertion "that is my name!" recalls Yahweh's disclosure to Moses in Exodus 3. The God who will bring his people back from exile and who will act in the ministry of his servant is the same as the One who delivered them from Egypt.

God acts for his own glory in the work of the servant (cf. Eph 1:3 – 14 and esp. Php 2:5 – 11, which contains echoes of the Isaianic servant theme). Chapters 40 – 48 are particularly emphatic as to the sole deity of the Lord. The servant's work does not detract from his unique glory but rather ministers to it. "The former things" (v.9) could refer to earlier prophecies given through Isaiah and already fulfilled, or the phrase could relate to the entire Israelite prophetic movement and its already fulfilled predictions.The point is that the God who has already proved his word true is able to make known new things. Perhaps he is speaking here of the predicted work of the Servant.

10 – 13 The voice of praise is often heard in the book of Isaiah (v.10; cf., e.g., ch. 12). The opening of this passage can be paralleled in the full-throated praise of Psalms 96:1; 98:1; 149:1 (cf. Rev 5:9). If we take the chapter as a unity, it is natural to see the chief cause of praise to be the work of the servant. If his ministry is to reach to the islands of the sea (v.10; cf. v.4), then it is not surprising that the whole earth joins in the song. The sea and the desert (v.11) probably find special mention because they are great areas with few people. Even in such places, however, there are islands and oases, and the people who live there are encouraged to join the universal song of praise (v.12).The bedouin,

represented by Kedar, and the inhabitants of rocky Sela will also be involved in this vocal worship. Even from the mountaintops, where perhaps only a wandering shepherd is to be found, singing voices are to be heard.

The song is a “new” one. Before there can be a new, however, there must be an old; and v.13, recalling perhaps Exodus 15:3 – 12, suggests that the old song was sung by Israel at its release from Egyptian bondage. If the song is occasioned by the work of the coming servant, then he is to achieve a new exodus, a great victory over the enemies of God, the nature of whom is not indicated here. What an amazing paradox when the gentleness of the servant (vv.2 – 3) is pondered! This paradox is even more strikingly expressed in Isaiah 53:1, for “the arm of the LORD” denotes power (cf. also 52:13; 53:12). It reaches its ultimate expression in Revelation 5:5 – 9, where the new song is occasioned by the triumph of the Lion, who is also the slain Lamb.

14 – 17 The majestic and terrifying anthropo-morphisms of v.13 prepare us for the astonishing picture of v.14. God presents himself in the guise of a pregnant woman that, as Whybray points out (in loc.), “is reinforced in the Hebrew by a breathless and convulsive style which seems ugly to modern western taste.” This proliferation of gutturals and aspirates may seem ugly, but it is most effective oral communication, just as the absence of the conventions conveys a totally different feeling as effectively in the song of 5:1 – 7 (see comments there). The long period of gestation — perhaps representing the Babylonian exile — is over; and God, who has seemed inactive, will be at pains to bring forth his people. Darr, 104 – 5, notes that this is the only place in Scripture where this image of a travailing woman is applied to Yahweh. She says, “The pronounced auditory character of the travailing woman simile links it to the preceding image of Yahweh going forth like a warrior, shouting a battle cry.”

Verse 15 means that the Lord will remove obstacles to his people’s deliverance (cf. 40:3 – 4), and the reference to the drying up of the waters may be an intentional allusion to the exodus. The unfamiliar paths (v.16) recall Abraham, who went out (from Babylonia) not knowing where God would take him. Both the Gentiles and the Israelites need light from God (cf. vv.6 – 7). Smart, commenting (in loc.) on v.17, says, “To what man gives the worship of his heart is not determined by a consideration of the possible alternatives, with an intelligent weighing of the relative worthiness of the various objects of

worship. He worships idols because they promise him more immediate satisfaction than does the worship of an unseen God." But here all such apparent promise that cannot in fact produce results will retreat before the deliverance effected by the true God.

18 – 20 This passage, depicting Israel as blind and deaf in her sin, stands in stark contrast to vv.1 – 7, where the perfect Servant of the Lord is depicted and where he is in fact to effect the opening of blind eyes. Clearly we have been brought back with a jolt from the future's perfection to the present's lamentable failure. A person who is both blind and deaf can hardly function as a servant at all (v.19), for how will he know what instructions his master has for him? Verse 20 makes it clear that this incommunicado condition is culpable. The faculties are in fact still present, but there is failure to attend.There is a blindness that is of the mind or heart rather than of the eye.

Such sinful inability throws the earlier ideal and futuristic picture into high relief. It also raises, of course, the further question, "Were we right to interpret the first Servant Song in relation to the nation at all?" Yes, possibly, but only in ideal terms and as a stage on the way to an interpretation in terms of a person. That passage showed God's ideal for Israel; the present one shows how far short of the ideal she has fallen and opens the way for the revelation in the later Servant Songs that the coming perfect Servant will give his life for the failed servant, Israel.

21 – 25 *Tôrâ* ("law") here (v.21) probably means "teaching," so including also the prophetic word. Whether Israel, as God's now useless servant, hears that word or not, God has determined to magnify it. Here the objective greatness of God's word is presented to us. In contrast, Israel in Babylon is anything but great and glorious. Her lot is a sorry one. Not only have the people been plundered, but they are also themselves plunder for their enemies. In the perspective of history the words "with no one to say, 'Send them back' " remind us that before too long Cyrus will say just that.

Verses 23 – 25 illustrate the blindness of Israel that was the subject of vv.18 – 19 (cf. 6:9 – 10). They failed to learn the spiritual and moral lessons of the exile, tracing the calamity of it to their own rebellion against God. Herein lay their obtuseness.

The occurrence of the first person plural in v.24, which is quickly replaced by the third person plural, makes us aware that the prophet himself is an exception to the condemnation from God that he has pronounced on the people. He has spiritual perception and moral sensitivity even if they do not. In this way he anticipates in his own person the Servant of the Lord he has so beautifully portrayed at the start of the chapter. The suggestion of Conrad, 83, that the sudden appearance of the first plural in the book of Isaiah from time to time is less of a problem if the text was orally delivered is interesting, but it of course depends on his theory of its composition and use, whereas the interpretation I have given involves no such presupposition.

NOTES

1 Young (in loc.) says, "The combination of *spirit* and *upon him* is found elsewhere only in 11:2 – 4. This is clearly a Messianic characteristic" (emphasis his).

4 The verbs translated "falter" and "be discouraged" take up words from similar roots in v.3, translated "bruised" and "smoldering," but chiastically. He will have compassion on the broken and the weak and will himself be kept strong in the face of adversity. See technical note in Watts (in loc.).

5 The combination "God the LORD" (הָאֵל יהוה, *hāʾēl yhwh*) occurs only here and in Psalm 85:8 in the OT, with the definite article giving emphasis to the sole deity of Yahweh.

11 For Kedar, see 21:16 – 17. *Sela*< means "rock" and so is often identified with Petra, though this cannot be established with certainty.

13 This verse could be interpreted as applying to the victories of Cyrus that will gain release for Israel rather than to the work of the servant. Either is possible, and the "exodus" of the return from exile itself foreshadows, like the original exodus, the work of Jesus, the Servant of the Lord (cf. Lk 9:31, where "departure" is ἔξοδος.

19 מְשֻׁלָּם (*m'šullām*, translated “the one committed to me”) is a word of uncertain meaning. For a conspectus of translations and conjectural emendations, see J. Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40 – 66,” *IB*, vol. 5, in loc; Watts and Oswalt (in loc.).

E. Grace Abounding and Despised (43:1 – 28)

1 But now, this is what the LORD says —
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
3 For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.
4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give men in exchange for you,
and people in exchange for your life.
5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
6 I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth —
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”
8 Lead out those who have eyes but are blind,
who have ears but are deaf.
9 All the nations gather together
and the peoples assemble.
Which of them foretold this
and proclaimed to us the former things?
Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,
so that others may hear and say, “It is true.”
10 “You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD,
“and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.
11 I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no savior.
12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed —
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “that I am God.
13 Yes, and from ancient days I am he.
No one can deliver out of my hand.
When I act, who can reverse it?”
14 This is what the LORD says —
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
“For your sake I will send to Babylon
and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride.
15 I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel’s Creator, your King.”
16 This is what the LORD says —
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,
17 who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:
18 “Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
19 See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.
20 The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the desert
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
21 the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.
22 “Yet you have not called upon me, O Jacob,
you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel.
23 You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings,
nor honored me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with grain offerings
nor wearied you with demands for incense.
24 You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me,
or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins
and wearied me with your offenses.

25 “I, even I, am he who blots out
your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more.
26 Review the past for me,
let us argue the matter together;
state the case for your innocence.
27 Your first father sinned;
your spokesmen rebelled against me.
28 So I will disgrace the dignitaries of your temple,
and I will consign Jacob to destruction
and Israel to scorn.

COMMENTARY

1 – 7 Chapter 43 expounds the redemptive grace of the Lord toward his people — grace that is highlighted at the end by reference to the people’s sin. The words “but now” (v.1) link this chapter with ch. 42, where the prophet declared the consequences of Israel’s refusal to obey the law of their God. Here Isaiah declares they will experience God as their Redeemer (cf. 44:7; Ro 3:24; Eph 2:6). These verses are controlled by the repeated exhortation not to be afraid (vv.1, 5).

The names “Jacob” and “Israel” together suggest God’s grace to an unworthy people and his great purpose for them. His names and titles are reassuring, for all those in v.3 imply a special relationship between God and his people, while his activities in their behalf — such as creation (out of “nothing” in Egypt), redemption, and protection — demonstrate his loving concern, made explicit in v.4. Knight (in loc.), suggesting that Cush and Seba may refer to southern Egypt, says that what is being declared in v.3 is that little Israel is worth more than the whole of greater Egypt.

God promises to his people that he will gather them from every quarter, the passage making many allusions to the exodus. In v.2 the waters and rivers look back to the Red Sea and the Jordan, and the fire reminds us of the singular deliverance described in Daniel 3 (cf. Ps 66:6, 12). The nation’s preciousness to him suggests a filial relationship (v.4; cf. Ex 4:22 – 23), which becomes individualized in v.7 (cf. Dt 14:1). As the firstborn of Israel were ransomed by substitution at the Passover and subsequently (Ex 13:14 – 16), so God will

ransom Israel as his own firstborn (so called in Ex 4:22 – 23).

The statement "I am the LORD, your God" (v.3) would remind every Jewish reader of Exodus 20, where the divine description is followed by the words "who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex 20:2). So, learning from this significant past event, they can rest in his promise to bring them again into their own land, this time from every point of the globe. Fear is banished as God's nature, activities, and promises to his people are considered.

8 – 13 The atmosphere of the prophecy changes from comfort to challenge. Once again the reader is transported to a courtroom (cf. 1:2; 41:1, 21); Israel and the nations are in court together. What is being examined is the Lord's claim to uniqueness, to sole deity. Most striking is the repetition of the first person singular, over and over again, which makes an overwhelming impact particularly in the Hebrew of vv.11 – 13, where it occurs twelve times. First of all, it is implied that God alone can foretell the future (v.9; cf. 41:25 – 29). He alone is divine, and this always has been and always will be the truth. From his dealings with Israel in the past — as Revealer and Savior of his people (v.12) and Judge of others at a time (presumably the exodus) when the people's trust was solely in him — it is clear that he alone is God and Savior (v.11).The reference to the formation of other gods (v.10) may allude to idolatry or else to Near Eastern myths concerning the coming into being of various gods.

Israel appears in these verses as God's witness (vv.10, 12), bearing testimony to what he has done, just as later the apostles were witnesses of a still greater work of God in Christ (Ac 1:8). Other nations can give no witness for their own impotent deities, but Israel has so much to declare, for the Lord's wonderful works have been done before her and in her behalf. Yet sadly, though she is God's chosen servant, she is blind and deaf (cf. Isa 42:18 – 20). To make matters worse, her choice by him was with a view to intelligent faith in him, which should have made her most articulate and effective as a witness for him.

14 – 15 The comforting tone of the opening verses of this chapter is now resumed and along with it some of the reassuring descriptions of the Lord (cf. vv.1, 3).The generalized promise of vv.5 – 7 gives place to a specific reference to Babylon, the first express mention of it since ch. 39. Despite textual and translational problems in v.14, it is clear that Babylon is to be judged. Again,

there is a piling up of titles and descriptions of the Lord (v.15).

16 – 21 The fundamental principles of the divine activity are changeless. As Baltzer (in loc.) says, writing of these verses, “This text is a model for the function of biblical tradition. The experience of the past helps toward an understanding of things in the present.” The outward shape of God’s activity alters, however, with the changing needs of God’s people. We must reflect on the past with gratitude and with stimulated faith but not to allow it to stereotype our expectations from God.

Here God affirms — in detail and with emphasis on the deadly efficiency of his deeds — that he was the God of the exodus (vv.16 – 17), and several commentators point out the highly dramatic character of the language here, making us recall perhaps the similar but more extensive dramatic language of 10:28 – 32. Yet the God of the exodus now asserts the wonderful freshness of his new act in prospect (vv.18 – 19). He had made a way through the waters; now he will make a new way — through the desert! Water, formerly a barrier, will now be a blessing, with God as its source. The abundant provision for people will be enjoyed by the wild creatures also (v.20). This may perhaps be an earnest of the regeneration of creation promised elsewhere in Isaiah (cf. 11:6 – 9; 65:25). Verses 20b – 21 suggest that election is not only for privilege but also for the praise of God (cf. Eph 1:4 – 6).

22 – 28 Once more the mood changes, and comfort gives place to accusation (see comment on v.1).Motyer (1993, in loc.), no doubt making an authorship point, says, “In a typical preexilic manner Isaiah challenges the people at a point where they may well have thought themselves to be above reproach: the cultic expression of religion.” The Lord’s past acts of grace should have evoked gratitude from his people, but they have offered him sins instead of sacrifices. Both ritualistic excess of sacrifices (cf. 1:2 – 17) and shameful neglect of them (43:23 – 24) testify to a deep spiritual malaise in the nation. No doubt different sections of the populace have thus shown their spiritual need in different ways. Motyer (1993, 1999, both in loc.), however, probes beneath the surface of the prophet’s language and argues that he intends here the same message as in 1:10ff.; he is saying that insincere sacrifice is really no sacrifice at all.

It is significant that both here and in ch. 1 the assurance of forgiveness of sins

(v.25) is given in the context of sacrifice. This casts much doubt on the view, much less frequently held now than it once was, that in Israel priest and prophet represented conflicting concepts of religion.The ultimate in sacrificial — and therefore priestly — teaching is given in 52:13 – 53:12, where there is full forgiveness through the Servant's sacrifice. There is much in 43:22 – 25 to remind us — either by comparison or by contrast — of ch. 1; and the double use of the word "burdened" certainly recalls this theme in the earlier chapter (see comments at 1:4, 14, 24).

The verb *ʿābad* (GK 6) here actually means "to enslave" or "to burden a slave with toil."The appropriate has been doubly replaced by the unexpected, on God's side by his incredible grace, and on Israel's by her unthinkable ingratitude. Motyer (1993, in loc.) aptly remarks, "*He who blots* is a participle which makes forgiveness of sins a divine attribute."

Verse 26 also evokes memories of 1:18, where the divine urge to forgive is expressed in the language of the courtroom, with a call for settlement of the issue. Oswalt (in loc.) remarks on the heavy irony of the verse. Here God speaks to establish the guilt of his people, for without recognition of this they will never come for forgiveness. The first father (v.27) could be Adam, Abraham, or Jacob; but most commentators favor the last. Little depends on it, for the basic meaning of the verse is that from the nation's beginning and throughout its history it has been characterized by sin, even on the part of its spiritual elite. Not only would that elite be disgraced, but the whole people would suffer destruction at God's hands. Baltzer (in loc.) finds echoes of the Jacob story throughout this passage, but some of these seem somewhat strained.

The word translated "destruction" (*ḥērem* [GK 3051], v.28) is well explained in the NIV margin: "The Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the LORD, often by totally destroying them." This is what Israel did, by God's command, to pagan Jericho. Again we recall ch. 1 with its reference to Sodom (cf. 1:9 – 10), for it implies that God will treat Israel as though she is pagan, so far away from him has she fallen. We should remember also, of course, that Isaiah's opening vision assured him that even devastating judgment for Israel will leave a tiny remnant in whom God's purposes will find ultimate fulfillment (cf. 6:11 – 13).

NOTES

2 North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) says, "The assurance that flames will *not* now scorch is intended as a contrast with the flames that *did* scorch (xlii.25)" (emphasis his).

3 The three place names here are almost equally appropriate whether the exodus or the return from exile is in view; for, as North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) says, "Cush and Seba correspond roughly to Upper Egypt and the Lower Sudan." Both were within Egypt's sphere of influence through much of her history and could therefore be thought of as sharing her fate. A comparison with 45:14 suggests that it is primarily the return from exile that is in view, for Cambyses, successor to Cyrus, conquered Egypt. Thexton comments, "The prophet intends the fabulous wealth and extent of these far-off regions to signify the depth of Yahweh's concern for His people, and His readiness to 'pay any price' for their redemption."

12 There is a textual problem here because of the absence of a verb in the first clause. Oswalt (in loc.) thinks the text almost certainly corrupt at this point.

14 The NIV translates the difficult second half of this verse fairly literally. The text does not require emendation, for בָּאֳנִיּוֹת רִנָּתָם (*bāʾᵒnîyôt*, lit., "in the ships of their joyous shout") surely suggests pride (cf. 2:16). The ships of the Chaldeans will be used by Israel's conquerors to transport them as captives.

20 For תַּנִּים וּבְנוֹת יַעֲנָה (*tannîm ûbᵉnôt yaʿᵃnâ*, "the jackals and the owls"), see Note at 34:13.

22 – 24 Young (in loc.) points out that the negative occurs seven times in these verses and that "me" after the first of these is emphatic. The passage does not teach that the sacrificial system was not divinely originated but rather was not intended to be a burden but a blessing.

24 קָנֶה (*qāneh*, translated "fragrant calamus," botanically named *acorus calamus*) is used in the manufacture of incense.

H. Babylon’s Ineffectual Idols and the Lord Almighty (46:1 – 13)

1 Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;
their idols are borne by beasts of burden.
The images that are carried about are burdensome,
a burden for the weary.
2 They stoop and bow down together;
unable to rescue the burden,
they themselves go off into captivity.
3 “Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all you who remain of the house of Israel,
you whom I have upheld since you were conceived,
and have carried since your birth.
4 Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.
5 “To whom will you compare me or count me equal?
To whom will you liken me that we may be compared?
6 Some pour out gold from their bags
and weigh out silver on the scales;
they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god,
and they bow down and worship it.
7 They lift it to their shoulders and carry it;
they set it up in its place, and there it stands.
From that spot it cannot move.
Though one cries out to it, it does not answer;
it cannot save him from his troubles.
8 “Remember this, fix it in mind,
take it to heart, you rebels.
9 Remember the former things, those of long ago;
I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is none like me.
10 I make known the end from the beginning,
from ancient times, what is still to come.
I say: My purpose will stand,
and I will do all that I please.
11 From the east I summon a bird of prey;
from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.
What I have said, that will I bring about;
what I have planned, that will I do.
12 Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted,
you who are far from righteousness.

13 I am bringing my righteousness near,
it is not far away;
and my salvation will not be delayed.
I will grant salvation to Zion,
my splendor to Israel.

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 All references so far made in the prophecy of Isaiah to pagan deities or idols have been general. Here, appropriately, where Cyrus and his victories are much in view, Isaiah names the two great gods of Babylon: Bel (also called Marduk) and Nebo (v.1), familiar to us from the compound names Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar. In ch. 45 Isaiah declared that every knee will bow to the Lord, and here he pictures the gods of great Babylon stooping low in humiliation. Baltzer (in loc.) suggests that what we have here is an ironic parody of a solemn procession in which symbols of the gods are carried around.

We noted earlier that Isaiah is fond of the imagery of burden-bearing (see comments on 1:4, 14, 24). Here he applies it first to the gods of Babylon and then, in vv.3 – 4, to the Lord. The idols are taken from their places of honor and placed on the backs of animals, bundled off perhaps first in flight and then to captivity (v.2). There is evidence that Merodach-Baladan (see ch. 39) removed the gods of Babylon from the city in some such way when Sennacherib's army appeared.

It is true (see comment on 45:1 – 7) that Cyrus attributed his victories to Marduk, but there can be little doubt that those who heard of the downfall of Babylon saw in this a colossal defeat for her gods. P. Volz (*Jesaia II* [Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1932], in loc.) has suggested that the tiredness of the animals is calculated to underline still further the impotence of the gods. They have become a liability to both man and beast. Knight's (in loc.) vigorous and dramatic translation of these verses, assuming that they are meant to represent an overheard conversation, is worth quoting:

"Bel's knees are giving way!"

"Nebo's toppling over!"

“They’ve actually put their graven images on beasts and cattle!”

“What loads your bundles are!”

“They’re only burdens for weary beasts!”

“The men have stumbled and their knees have given way too!”

“They can’t rescue their load!”

“(The gods) themselves have gone off into exile.”

3 – 4 How different is the Lord’s relationship to his people! His people do not carry him; rather, he bears them. Moreover, he has always done so and always will. This passage is an inspired affirmation of the only worthy concept of deity, that of the true, eternal God, over against the gross inadequacies and irreverences of paganism. The verbs used here — repeating and underlining over and over the fact that he is the God who carries his people — give place suddenly and dramatically at the end of v.4 to a new one. The God of their history promises to rescue them.The work of Cyrus is to be viewed as God’s great work of deliverance.

5 – 7 Isaiah has already proclaimed the Lord’s uniqueness in ringing rhetorical questions (cf. 40:18, 25); he repeats this, most aptly here (v.5), for that uniqueness has been singularly demonstrated in the overthrow of Babylon’s gods. Not in their downfall alone, but at every point in their history, the idols’ paltry character vividly contrasts with the Lord’s unique majesty. The poor values of humankind determine their idols’ materials. The whole process, from the preparation through the commissioning of the workmen and the transportation of the idols to their eventual worship, is unavailing, for they are powerless to hear, speak, or save.

8 – 13 This part of Isaiah concentrates largely on consolation and encouragement, but the prophet is a realist and knows from experience that there is much unbelief among the people.They approached the prophecies of Cyrus

and his work with skepticism. The Lord calls them to consider the history of his relationship with his people (vv.8 – 9). This illustrates the important fact that faith has objective reference and so is a response to revelation, to truth about God declared by God himself.

The people's entire history has demonstrated Yahweh's sole deity and especially his power to predict (v.10). He asserts it again: from the east (v.11; cf. 41:2), Cyrus will swoop on his victims as suddenly as the descent of an eagle or a falcon from the sky. Whether they believe it or not (v.12), it will happen; for in this way the Lord will fulfill his saving purpose for Israel. The term "Zion" here (v.13) should be noted; it is a reminder of the promises of 44:26 – 28.

C. Franke raises a question about this passage and about the references to idolatry in ch. 48. Is the prophet mocking the Babylonians for their idolatry, or is he accusing Israel herself of practicing it? A reference to Israelite idolatry occurs in 48:5, but is the prophet referring to something happening during the Babylonian captivity or at some earlier time? We know from passages such as Jeremiah 16:13 and Ezekiel 20:30 – 32 that some of the people continued to practice idolatry even during the exile. It seems likely that this is mockery but that its purpose is to indicate to those among the exiles tempted to practice idolatry, or even in some cases actually practicing it, what folly it is.

NOTES

1 – 2 A number of commentators (e.g., Westermann, Whybray) note the rapid rhythm of these two verses, expressive for the writer and inducing in the reader a feeling of excitement. Knight highlights this by his vigorous translation of them (see above). In this context the three long vowels of הָלְכָה (*hālākâ*, "go"), as North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) points out, emphasize weariness. We might compare the clause "so strode he back slow to the wounded king" in Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur*.

8 H. Leene ("Isaiah 46:8 — Summons to be Human?" *JSOT* 30 [1984]: 111 – 21) comments on the longstanding problem occasioned by the *hapax legomenon* וְהִתְאַשָּׁשׁוּ (*wᵉhitʾōšāšû*)and discusses ten solutions (see also Franke, 50 – 52; G. R. Driver, "Isaiah 40 – 66: Linguistic and Textual Problems," *JTS* 36 [1935]: 400).

Oswalt (in loc.) translates it “make yourselves firm,” arguing for this because it is supported by the Targum, fits the context, and can be linked with a Semitic root. The general thrust of the passage is not greatly affected by the various proposals, for the verse is clearly at least a call for attention and recalled so that lessons may be learned.

11 עַיִט (*ʿayiṭ*, “bird of prey”) is found also in 18:6, but its precise meaning is unknown. It is probably a type of eagle, falcon, or vulture.

12 Many commentators follow the LXX’s amendment of “you stubborn-hearted” to “whose courage is failing,” but Baltzer (in loc.) is surely correct in rejecting this, for comparison with the following clause supports the stronger expression of divine criticism.

F. Israel's Great God and the Folly of Idolatry (44:1 – 23)

1 "But now listen, O Jacob, my servant,
Israel, whom I have chosen.
2 This is what the LORD says —,
he who made you, who formed you in the womb,
and who will help you:
Do not be afraid, O Jacob, my servant,
Jeshurun, whom I have chosen.
3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring,
and my blessing on your descendants.
4 They will spring up like grass in a meadow,
like poplar trees by flowing streams.
5 One will say, 'I belong to the LORD';
another will call himself by the name of Jacob;
still another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,
' and will take the name Israel.
6 "This is what the LORD says —
Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God.
7 Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and lay out before me
what has happened since I established my ancient people,
and what is yet to come —
yes, let him foretell what will come.
8 Do not tremble, do not be afraid.
Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?
You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?
No, there is no other Rock; I know not one."
9 All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame.
10 Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
which can profi t him nothing?
11 He and his kind will be put to shame;
craftsmen are nothing but men.
Let them all come together and take their stand;
they will be brought down to terror and infamy.
12 The blacksmith takes a tool

and works with it in the coals;
he shapes an idol with hammers,
he forges it with the might of his arm.
He gets hungry and loses his strength;
he drinks no water and grows faint.
13 The carpenter measures with a line
and makes an outline with a marker;
he roughs it out with chisels
and marks it with compasses.
He shapes it in the form of man,
of man in all his glory,
that it may dwell in a shrine.
14 He cut down cedars,
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.
He let it grow among the trees of the forest,
or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.
15 It is man's fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fi re and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it.
16 Half of the wood he burns in the fire;
over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill.
He also warms himself and says,
"Ah! I am warm; I see the fire."
17 From the rest he makes a god, his idol;
he bows down to it and worships.
He prays to it and says,
"Save me; you are my god."
18 They know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds closed so they cannot understand.
19 No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
"Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"
20 He feeds on ashes, a deluded heart misleads him;
he cannot save himself, or say,
"Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"
21 "Remember these things, O Jacob,
for you are my servant, O Israel.
I have made you, you are my servant;
O Israel, I will not forget you.

22 I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me,
for I have redeemed you."
23 Sing for joy, O heavens, for the LORD has done this;
shout aloud, O earth beneath.
Burst into song, you mountains,
you forests and all your trees,
for the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
he displays his glory in Israel.

COMMENTARY

1 – 5 Once again, as in 43:1, after a strong affirmation of divine judgment God says, "But now." Verses 1 – 2 take up again much of the phraseology of the earlier oracle (see comments on 43:1). The name "Jeshurun" (v.2) is found in Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:5, 26, and, like Israel, provides a contrast in meaning with Jacob, as there can be little doubt that it means "the Upright One." Jacob, of course, means "Deceiver" (cf. Ge 27:36; 32:28). It may suggest that the Jacob-Israel name combination, so common in chs. 41 – 49, is used with due awareness of the special sense of each, as though to designate the people as sinful and yet as the object of the Lord's gracious purpose of redemption.

Commenting on v.3, Whybray (in loc.) notes that "there is a general agreement among the commentators that unlike other passages (e.g., 41:18) which use similar language, these promises of abundant rain do not refer to miracles which will occur during the promised journey through the desert but are metaphorical, denoting the conferring of a blessing." This means, of course, that v.3a is being read in the light of v.3b, which seems entirely appropriate. Numerous progeny are often treated in the OT as a sign of God's blessing (cf., e.g., Ge 15:5; 17:3 – 5), and spiritual progeny are evidence of God's blessing on his suffering Servant (53:10). The two analogies are as apt as they are clear.

Prophecy is full of surprises, common theological motifs suddenly giving way, as here, to startling thoughts. Isaiah is almost Pauline at this point, for the Gentile converts of v.5 seem like an (adopted?) extension of the children of Israel to whom v.4 refers. The statement, "I will pour out my Spirit" (v.3) reminds us of Joel 2:29, with its fulfillment at Pentecost and the Gentile

evangelization that followed it. North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) says, “The passage is remarkable as being perhaps the earliest in which what we call the church is conceived of as a community transcending the boundaries of race.” Verse 5 probably refers to the mark of a master on the hand of a slave (cf. 49:16).

6 – 8 The expression “This is what the LORD says” (v.6), though a standard prophetic formula, should not be regarded as purely formal. Here it is most apt as introducing verses in which God’s perceptive word is proclaimed. The piling up of divine titles is characteristic of this part of Isaiah (cf. 43:14; 44:24; but also 1:24).

Although Yahweh is the God of his own special people, he is also sovereign over all history and so holds sole title to the designation “God.” He is incomparable (v.7; cf. 40:25), especially in his power to interpret the past and predict the future. The statement “I established my ancient people” (v.7), the phrases “the first” (v.6) and “long ago” (v.8), and the use of the title “Rock” from Deuteronomy 32 all evoke memories of the exodus, assuring the people that the first exodus is the guarantee of the second. Incidentally, the prophet uses the word “rock” in a variety of ways, as will be seen from its use also in 48:21 and 51:1.

9 – 20 Many modern scholars think the style, the somewhat “labored” irony, and the sheer length of this passage raise doubts about its authorship; and they deny it to the prophet who wrote the bulk of these chapters, although others support its authorship by him. The ideas in it can be paralleled again and again, however, in chs. 40 – 48. Comments on style are so often subjective, so that Simon (in loc.) can call this passage “a masterpiece” and Knight (in loc.) “a brilliant piece of writing.” Schubert was a great composer, but what to one music critic is the “heavenly length” of the first movement of his Ninth Symphony is to another excessive exposition of its musical themes. Debussy could even find Beethoven dull! The language Isaiah uses rests on the borderline between poetry and prose, so that it cannot be put firmly into either genre. This is not, however, uncommon in the prophets. Oswalt (in loc. on vv.9 – 11) has helpful comments in support of the passage’s genuineness as a work of this prophet.

The passage commences with theological statements in vv.9 – 11, which form

an introduction to the imaginative construction of the scene in the idol-maker's shop, which is so vivid that we feel the prophet must have watched these craftsmen at their work. The workmen share the worthlessness of their images. Whether viewed singly or collectively, they are nothing and must suffer discrediting and judgment.

Isaiah's imaginative gift is pressed into the service of his inspired satire. Neoplatonism and Brahmanism, in their different ways, have attempted to provide an intellectual framework and justification for idolatry. Isaiah will have none of this, because he is jealous for the glory and sole godhead of the God of Israel. Whether the medium is metal (v.12) or wood (v.13), the enterprise deserves nothing but ridicule. God-given strength and skill are being misused, and sin has deprived the idolater of any sense of what is fitting.

The craftsman uses a tree that is dependent on God's rain for its growth and uses it for two purposes — to make a fire for warmth and a god for worship! Here is the reductio ad absurdum of idolatry, for sin has blinded the mind (vv.18 – 20). Right from his call (6:9 – 10), Isaiah was aware of the blinding effects of sin. The words "he feeds on ashes" (v.20) mean literally "he herds ashes," a ridiculous activity suggested perhaps by the ashes remaining after the idolater's fire has burned itself out.

21 – 23 The call to remember (v.21) probably embraces both the vast contrast between the true God and the idols as well as the earlier reminders of his activity and power to predict, revealed in the history of his people. The promise of 43:25 is repeated, but now the people's sins are compared to passing phenomena of the sky, blotting out the sun (v.22). This does not mean that their sins are not serious, but it does mean that God has determined to deal with them in forgiveness. Here is a rare OT juxtaposition of forgiveness and redemption (cf. Ps 130:8).

The command to "return to me" implies the objectivity of God's redemptive provision, to which the people are called to react in penitence. This objective work is so wonderful that the whole universe, once called to witness God's indictment of his people's sin (1:2), is now called on to share their exuberant joy at his redemption. Clearly the glory he displays is the glory of his grace (cf. Eph 1:6).

NOTES

4 Commenting on קָנֶה (*qāneh* “like poplar trees” [NIV]; so 1QIsa, LXX), North (*Isaiah 40 – 55,* in loc.) says, “It is now certain that the difficult Heb. *ben* in this passage is not the preposition ‘between’ but the ‘ben-tree’ . . . , a species of *moringa* remarkable for the intense greenness of its leaves.The word is found in Arabic, Aramaic-Syriac, and Akkadian.”

7 “From my placing an eternal people and things to come” (RSV) gives the literal sense (cf. NIV, “since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come”). The conjectural emendation suggested by some (cf. *BHS* mg.) is not really needed because, though the construction seems somewhat harsh, the MT’s meaning is clear enough and fits the context.

12 מַעֲצָד (*maʿᵃṣād*), found elsewhere only in Jeremiah 10:3, is rendered here as “tool” in a verse dealing with an ironworker; however, the exact significance of the word is still unknown.

14 Isaiah is fond of grouping flora and fauna (cf., e.g., 13:21 – 22; 28:25; 30:6).

G. God's Actions through Cyrus (44:24 – 45:25)

OVERVIEW

This great passage, with its two explicit references to Cyrus, has attracted much scholarly discussion.

For many modern scholars it represents the strongest argument for Deutero-Isaiah, for they cannot conceive of supernatural predictive prophecy of such detail. Yet it cannot be denied that the context for such predictions here is the most appropriate in the whole Bible, for Isaiah 40 – 48 says more about the Lord's power to predict than any other passage (see Introduction, pp. 447 – 48). Motyer (1999, in loc.) refers to the enormous solemnity of 44:24 – 45:8 and its successive assertions that "the Lord is solely at work (44:24), wholly at work (45:7) and creatively at work (45:8)."

God assures his people here that he plans to rebuild Judah, Jerusalem, and his temple, that this will become possible through the pagan Cyrus, and that the ultimate issue of the divine acts through Cyrus is that people everywhere will acknowledge God's uniqueness (44:24 – 45:8). His sovereign choice of such a vehicle is unchallengeable and the coming of Cyrus absolutely certain (45:9 – 13). God will vindicate Israel as his people in the eyes of pagan peoples subdued by Cyrus (45:14 – 17). This will herald a final challenge to paganism, the offer of salvation to people everywhere, and the ultimate submission of the whole world to his sovereign rule (45:18 – 25).

24 "This is what the LORD says —
your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD,
who has made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens,
who spread out the earth by myself,
25 who foils the signs of false prophets
and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise
and turns it into nonsense,

26 who carries out the words of his servants
and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,
who says of Jerusalem, ‘It shall be inhabited,’
of the towns of Judah,‘They shall be built,’
and of their ruins, ‘I will restore them,’
27 who says to the watery deep, ‘Be dry,
and I will dry up your streams,’
28 who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd
and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, “Let it be rebuilt,”
and of the temple, “Let its foundations be laid.” ’
45:1 “This is what the LORD says to his anointed,
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of
to subdue nations before him
and to strip kings of their armor,
to open doors before him
so that gates will not be shut:
2 I will go before you
and will level the mountains;
I will break down gates of bronze
and cut through bars of iron.
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness,
riches stored in secret places,
so that you may know that I am the LORD,
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.
4 For the sake of Jacob my servant,
of Israel my chosen,
I summon you by name
and bestow on you a title of honor,
though you do not acknowledge me.
5 I am the LORD, and there is no other;
apart from me there is no God.
I will strengthen you,
though you have not acknowledged me,
6 so that from the rising of the sun
to the place of its setting
men may know there is none besides me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
7 I form the light and create darkness,
I bring prosperity and create disaster;
I, the LORD, do all these things.
8 “You heavens above, rain down righteousness;
let the clouds shower it down.
Let the earth open wide,
let salvation spring up,
let righteousness grow with it;

I, the LORD, have created it.
9 “Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker,
to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground.
Does the clay say to the potter,
‘What are you making?’
Does your work say,
‘He has no hands’?
10 Woe to him who says to his father,
‘What have you begotten?’
or to his mother,
‘What have you brought to birth?’
11 “This is what the LORD says —
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:
Concerning things to come,
do you question me about my children,
or give me orders about the work of my hands?
12 It is I who made the earth
and created mankind upon it.
My own hands stretched out the heavens;
I marshaled their starry hosts.
13 I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness:
I will make all his ways straight.
He will rebuild my city
and set my exiles free,
but not for a price or reward,
says the LORD Almighty.”
14 This is what the LORD says:
“The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush,
and those tall Sabeans —
they will come over to you
and will be yours;
they will trudge behind you,
coming over to you in chains.
They will bow down before you
and plead with you, saying,
‘Surely God is with you, and there is no other;
there is no other god.’ ”
15 Truly you are a God who hides himself,
O God and Savior of Israel.
16 All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced;
they will go off into disgrace together.
17 But Israel will be saved by the LORD
with an everlasting salvation;
you will never be put to shame or disgraced,
to ages everlasting.
18 For this is what the LORD says —
he who created the heavens,

he is God;
he who fashioned and made the earth,
he founded it;
he did not create it to be empty,
but formed it to be inhabited —
he says:
"I am the LORD,
and there is no other.
19 I have not spoken in secret,
from somewhere in a land of darkness;
I have not said to Jacob's descendants,
'Seek me in vain.'
I, the LORD, speak the truth;
I declare what is right.
20 "Gather together and come;
assemble, you fugitives from the nations.
Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood,
who pray to gods that cannot save.
21 Declare what is to be, present it —
let them take counsel together.
Who foretold this long ago,
who declared it from the distant past?
Was it not I, the LORD?
And there is no God apart from me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none but me.
22 "Turn to me and be saved,
all you ends of the earth;
for I am God, and there is no other.
23 By myself I have sworn,
my mouth has uttered in all integrity
a word that will not be revoked:
Before me every knee will bow;
by me every tongue will swear.
24 They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone
are righteousness and strength.'"
All who have raged against him
will come to him and be put to shame.
25 But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel
will be found righteous and will exult.

COMMENTARY

24 – 28 Torrey's suggestion (in loc.) that both references to Cyrus should be

excised as later interpolations, though followed by few commentators, is nevertheless referred to by many of them. How then can we account for the virtual ignoring of the highly significant study of these verses by Allis, 62 – 80, by almost all but conservative scholars? Allis demonstrates that verses 24 – 28 are a "poem of the transcendence of the God of Israel." He shows that the poem is most carefully constructed and that a study of its form shows most clearly that the revelation of the name of Cyrus comes at its dramatic climax. This is particularly appropriate if the poem comes from Isaiah of Jerusalem, for it emphasizes the role of the prophets in prediction. The NIV has beautifully translated it, conveying much of its poetic form to the English reader while remaining true to the meaning of the text — a combination often difficult to achieve.

The assertion "This is what the LORD says" (v.24) punctuates this section of the prophecy (cf. 45:1, 11, 18). The Lord is first designated as his people's Redeemer. This is the character in which he will act in their behalf. The phrase "who formed you in the womb" links this passage with 44:2 and so argues its integrity with the rest of Isaiah 40 – 48. The simple yet important affirmation "I am the LORD" is a reminder of Exodus 20:2 (cf. comment on 43:11), and it introduces a series of prepositional phrases unparalleled in the OT. These are legitimately translated as relative clauses in the NIV and English versions generally.

These phrases build up to a most powerful doctrine of the past activities of the God of Israel, and they employ themes that have already found prominent place in the prophecy since the beginning of ch. 40. He is the sole Creator (v.24; cf. 40:12, 22, 26, 28; 42:5), the sole Revealer of the future (vv.25 – 26a; cf. 41:4, 26 – 29; 44:7 – 8), the sole Guarantor of a new day for Jerusalem and Judah (v.26b; cf. 40:2, 9). The meaning of v.27 is disputed, but Young (in loc.) is probably correct in interpreting this and the next verse along the lines of Jeremiah 23:7 – 8 and so seeing it as a reference to the exodus: "Just as at the first exodus the power of God was exhibited in the safe passage of the nation through the Red Sea waters, so now, in the deliverance from the world power, represented by Babylon, that power will again be seen, and whatever may stand in the way will be completely removed."

There have already been allusions to Cyrus (cf. comments at 41:2, 25), but these did not name him, for his name has been held back for this great moment

of poetic-prophetic climax. Only in 1 Kings 13:2 do we find anything quite comparable in the OT, though Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 could hardly be made more wonderfully specific by mention of the name of Jesus.

Only a little less dramatic than the name is the description of Cyrus as "my shepherd" (v.28), for he is a pagan foreigner. It is true that Hammurabi, king of Babylon — more than one thousand years before Cyrus — called himself "the shepherd that brings good"; but the term here reminds the people of the shepherding role of their own kings — especially of David (cf. 1Sa 5:2) — and also of the anthropomorphic description of God in 40:11. The lost sheep will be rounded up and returned to their true fold in Judah by this foreigner, who will make possible the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the very temple — the sacred temple — of Israel's God. This oracle gives the first explicit reference in the book of Isaiah to God's plans to rebuild the city.

Miscall, 111, among others, makes the point that Cyrus is a shadowy figure in this book and that we are never explicitly told of his success or ultimate fate. Moreover, his kingdom, Persia, is never named.The absence of such features serves perhaps even more to focus attention particularly on the dramatic announcement of his name.

45:1 – 7 The last five verses of ch. 44, for all their majesty, contain only one main statement, one of the simplest that is grammatically possible: "I am the LORD" (v.24). All else leads into or amplifies this great affirmation. It is repeated in vv.3, 5, and 6. This is surely significant in an address to a pagan king. "His anointed" (v.1) and "my shepherd" (44:28) explain each other, for both, though possessing wider areas of application, meet in the concept of a divinely chosen and divinely employed king. There is precedent for the divine anointing of a non-Israelite king, though in one passage only (1Ki 19:15 – 16). Although the living God normally used Israelites for such purposes, he is sovereign and may use whom he will.

In these verses some of God's promises to his people are echoed (cf. 40:4; 41:13; 43:1). Because in God's purpose Cyrus functions for Israel, he comes into the good of some of God's promises to that people. He will enjoy great triumphs over his enemies and will find their fortified cities no obstacle to his advance (vv.1, 2). Herodotus (1.179) wrote of Babylon, "There are a hundred gates in the

circuit of the wall, all of bronze with bronze uprights and lintels." The reference to great wealth in v.3 may refer equally well to the treasures of Lydia — the riches of whose ruler, Croesus, were proverbial — or to Babylon, and in fact Cyrus overcame both. That all these victories were for the sake of little Israel is one of the ironies of God's control of history.What to human beings is laughable is nevertheless true, for God's ways are not our ways.

We have noted that Cyrus has been introduced already, though not by name, in ch. 41 (see comments at 41:2, 25).The prophet declared that Cyrus calls on the Lord's name (41:25). In the present passage too (v.3) it is said that God's support of Cyrus has as its purpose that he may know that Israel's God is the Lord. Yet twice it is denied that Cyrus acknowledges him. In the Cyrus Cylinder (see *EBC*, 1:238), the king attributes his victories to Marduk, god of Babylon; yet in Ezra 1 Cyrus is quoted as asserting that the Lord gave him dominion. Clearly Cyrus used the names of deities without any sense of exclusiveness. Josephus (*Ant.* 11.5 [1.2]) recorded, "These things Cyrus knew from reading the book of prophecy which Isaiah had left behind two hundred and ten years earlier." A universal note is struck in v.6. Young (in loc.) says:

> We need not necessarily assume that this purpose would be immediately accomplished. Cyrus was raised up that the Jews might return to Palestine and that Christ might then be born in Bethlehem, and that when redemption had been accomplished and its message proclaimed there might be a universal acknowledgment that the God of Israel is the true God.

The general assertions of absolute monotheism in vv.5 – 6 are underlined by the specific affirmations of v.7. There are three in all, the first related to the universe, the second to human society, and the third summing up. Genesis seems to imply — if it does not expressly teach — the creation of darkness as well as light by God (Ge 1:1 – 5). Although it is said in Genesis that the light is good, there is no suggestion that the darkness is evil, for it too has its function (cf. Ps 104:19 – 23). The words *šal*m*ôm* and *ra* m< (rendered "prosperity" and "disaster"; GK 8934, 8274) are (lit.) "peace" and "evil."

Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) states that of 640 OT occurrences of *ra*<, about 275 refer to calamity or disaster. Verse 7 can be well interpreted in terms of Amos 3:6. So the God who created darkness that is not itself evil — though it is sometimes used to symbolize it — and who brings disaster as a punishment for sin, is supreme over all. Isaiah has already shown that God brings calamitous

judgment on humans because of their sins (cf., e.g., Isa 10:5 – 12). Wester-mann (in loc.) roundly declares,“If the creator of evil and woe is God, there is no room left for a devil.” But this is to go far beyond what the verse says. It is an attack on polytheistic dualism, in which there is at least division of labor and often conflict among the deities. It probably does not confront Zoroastrian dualism directly, for there is no clear evidence that Cyrus shared this belief with some of his successors.

8 This verse, following close on v.7, suggests that the prophet has Genesis 1 in his mind. “The heavens” and “the earth,” called on first to witness the rebellion of God’s people (Isa. 1:2) and then to praise God for redeeming them (44:23), are now addressed in ecstatic apostrophe.The inspired poetic imagination of the prophet sees the processes by which vegetation grows on the earth as a symbol of God’s saving work (cf. Heb 6:7). The God of creation and of redemption is one God, and so the one sphere may be used to illustrate the other.

Righteous ness and salvation are closely linked here, as so often in this part of the book (cf. 46:12 – 13; 51:5 – 6, 8; 56:1 – 2; 59:17; 61:10; 62:1; 63:1). God’s righteous order of the future is to include the manifestation of his salvation. In Pauline theology the righteous ness of God is seen in the gospel (cf., e.g., Ro 1:16 – 17; 3:21 – 22; et al.); for through the bearing of sin by Christ, God’s righteous wrath against sin has been fully manifested and sinners have been given, by his grace, a righteous standing with God (Ro 3:25 – 26).

9 – 10 The style of these verses recalls Isaiah 5, with its series of woes (see comment on 5:8). The point at issue in the quarrel (v.9) is probably God’s disclosure to his people that he will deliver them through the pagan Cyrus. We cannot accuse God of using inappropriate means to achieve his ends. Isaiah is particularly gifted in portraying sin as ridiculous and illogical, as he does here with the illustrations of the discarded scraps of pottery and the lump of clay in the hands of the potter (cf. Jer 18:1 – 6).Verse 10 implies an a fortiori application to God the Creator (cf. Ro 9:20 – 21).

11 – 13 There is a clear, if implicit, reference to Cyrus in v.13 (the NIV supplies “Cyrus” for the MT’s “him”); and this passage establishes him as a subject of prediction, not simply of description *ex eventu* (after the fact). The reference to the children and the work of his hands are chiastic allusions to vv.9

– 10. The coming of Cyrus, though still future, is as certain as the existence of God's created universe. Not only is Jerusalem to be rebuilt (cf. 44:26 – 28), but also its people will be freed from their exile — and that without any financial inducement to Cyrus. The latter fact, therefore, underscores still further the divine origin of all these events.

14 This verse anticipates ch. 60. In 43:3 the Persians are promised Egypt, Cush, and Seba (see comments there), while here these are seen submitting to Israel. Two different stages of their history are, of course, in view. Despite their chains, the language suggests the people will voluntarily submit, and that for the best of reasons — recognition of Israel's God and him alone. Young (in loc.) says, "Paul evidently ref lects upon this language when he says, ' . . . and declare that God of a truth is in you' (1Co 14:25)." (For a general discussion of the interpretation of such passages, see the Introduction, pp. 451 – 52.)

15 – 17 It is not easy to decide between conflicting interpretations of v.15. Some commentators (e.g., Oswalt, in loc.) see this verse as part of the address by the nations that begins in v.14, and this would certainly be contextually appropriate. It can, however, also be viewed as a prophetic exclamation of wonderment prompted by the amazing disclosures just made. The conversion of the Gentiles involves the discrediting of idolatry (v.16) and the salvation and vindication of God's ancient people (v.17). The final phrase of v.17 makes it clear that this is no momentary thing but a permanent vindication of them by their God.

18 – 19 In this section of the prophecy, the introductory formula ("This is what the LORD says," v.18) introduces some utterances of grandeur about God himself. He created the universe as an environment for humans; so, it is implied, his work is to be discerned in history as well as in nature. The word *toh*m *û* ("empty") in v.18 occurs in Genesis 1:2, and this confirms that this chapter is in the prophet's mind here. Perhaps God does hide himself, for revelation is his sole prerogative; but when he does speak, his word is clear and true, enabling his people — called to seek him — to find him in truth (v.19).

20 – 21 After the disclosure about Egypt, Cush, and Seba in v.14, the prophet calls on the remnant of humanity left after all history's wars and upheavals (v.20). There is to be a last challenge to paganism. Only the Lord predicted the

coming of Cyrus and the righteous salvation of Israel. He has established forever his claim to be recognized as the only God there is (v.21).

22 – 25 Another amazing disclosure is made here, for the God whose actions discredit paganism calls the discomfited idolaters not for the judgment they so richly deserve but for salvation — if only they will turn to him (v.22; cf. 1Th 1:9 – 10)! God's great decree has been announced that all humanity shall come to acknowledge his sovereignty (v.23).There are definite echoes of v.23 in Philippians 2:10 – 11, with implications concerning the deity of Jesus all the more impressive because of the emphatic monotheism of the context here. Not all will be saved, but all must acknowledge the Lord as God alone (v.24). Under his ultimate sovereignty there will be both judgment for the rebel and salvation for God's people.

NOTES

24 – 28 Some commentators who accept the Deutero-Isaiah theory (e.g., North) are impressed with the literary form of this without drawing the conclusion that Allis, 62 – 80, so well contends for, that the form serves the interests of dramatic, predictive disclosure. See the comment above.

45:2 הֲדוּרִים (*hᵉdûrîm,*' "mountains") is a word of uncertain meaning, but the translation fits the context and the imagery of the prophet in similar passages (cf., e.g., 40:4). See Watts (in loc.) for conjectural emendations, including suggestions for repointing the text.

4 The title of honor will be "my shepherd" (44:28) or "my anointed" (cf. v.1), or will have a more general reference to an honored place in the working out of God's purposes in history.

8 In this verse "righteous ness" is first צֶדֶק (*ṣedeq*) and then צְדָקָה (*ṣᵉdāqâ*), masculine and feminine respectively, but virtual synonyms.

14 Some commentators amend the pointing of the MT's second person plural pronouns so that they are masculine and so may refer to Cyrus, rather than

feminine, referring to Israel (see Baltzer, in loc.). This is unnecessary in view of the parallel with ch. 60; in fact, as Motyer suggests (1993, 1999, in loc.), “you” (fem.) may even be deliberate to make it clear that the reference is *not* to Cyrus. At v.17 the pronouns become masculine. Most of those who follow this emendation attribute this chapter to Deutero-Isaiah but ch. 60 to Trito-Isaiah.

18 – 19 תֹּהוּ (*tōhû*; GK 9332), translated “empty” and “in vain” here, occurs also in Genesis 1:2. It is doubtful whether support for the idea of a catastrophe between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2, with a consequent voiding of the universe, should be sought or can be found here.

I. The Fall of Proud Babylon (47:1 – 15)

OVERVIEW

There is general agreement among scholars of all schools that this chapter constitutes a unity. Franke, 145 – 50, points out a number of unifying factors, highlighting the frequent use of negatives in it. This is not surprising, as the general theme of the chapter is divine judgment. We experience a sense of fitness with an oracle about the downfall of Babylon's gods being followed immediately by a proclamation of the fall of Babylon herself. The discomfiture of the one should involve the fall of the other, for there is solidarity between them.

Baltzer (in loc.) points out the dramatic tension of this passage. Darr, 171, compares and contrasts this passage with 3:26 and says, "Here is a reversal the reader can relish." She also writes, 174: "In summary, Isaiah 47 exploits the conventional personification of cities as females to describe Babylon's demise in terms of tragedies and afflictions endured by women. Enslaved, exposed, defenseless, and bereaved, she is Yahweh's victim; and he shows her no mercy." Her arrogance and aggressiveness, of course, thoroughly merit such a judgment.

1 "Go down, sit in the dust,
Virgin Daughter of Babylon;
sit on the ground without a throne,
Daughter of the Babylonians.
No more will you be called
tender or delicate.
2 Take millstones and grind flour;
take off your veil.
Lift up your skirts, bare your legs,
and wade through the streams.
3 Your nakedness will be exposed
and your shame uncovered.
I will take vengeance;
I will spare no one."
4 Our Redeemer — the LORD Almighty is his name —is the Holy One of Israel.
5 "Sit in silence, go into darkness,

Daughter of the Babylonians;
no more will you be called
queen of kingdoms.
6 I was angry with my people
and desecrated my inheritance;
I gave them into your hand,
and you showed them no mercy.
Even on the aged
you laid a very heavy yoke.
7 You said, ‘I will continue forever —
the eternal queen!’
But you did not consider these things
or reflect on what might happen.
8 “Now then, listen, you wanton creature,
lounging in your security
and saying to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.
I will never be a widow
or suffer the loss of children.’
9 Both of these will overtake you
in a moment, on a single day:
loss of children and widowhood.
They will come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries
and all your potent spells.
10 You have trusted in your wickedness
and have said, ‘No one sees me.’
Your wisdom and knowledge mislead you
when you say to yourself,
‘I am, and there is none besides me.’
11 Disaster will come upon you,
and you will not know how to conjure it away.
A calamity will fall upon you
that you cannot ward off with a ransom;
a catastrophe you cannot foresee
will suddenly come upon you.
12 “Keep on, then, with your magic spells
and with your many sorceries,
which you have labored at since childhood.
Perhaps you will succeed,
perhaps you will cause terror.
13 All the counsel you have received has only worn you out!
Let your astrologers come forward,
those stargazers who make predictions month by month,
let them save you from what is coming upon you.
14 Surely they are like stubble;
the fire will burn them up.

They cannot even save themselves
from the power of the flame.
Here are no coals to warm anyone;
here is no fire to sit by.
15 That is all they can do for you —
these you have labored with
and trafficked with since childhood.
Each of them goes on in his error;
there is not one that can save you.

COMMENTARY

1 – 4 The prophet's inspired imagination continues to overleap the years separating his own day from the close of the Babylonian exile. He addresses the proud capital city with irony as "my lady Babylon" (Thexton, in loc.). She is to be dethroned and made to sit in the dust (v.1).

There may be three analogies here, following one another in swift succession: (1) Babylon is the beggar sitting in the dust; (2) she is the slave divesting herself of the gentlewoman's veil and accepting the hard grind of manual labor (v.2a); and (3) she is the fugitive needing to tuck in her skirts to enable her to cross streams (vv.2b – 3), abandoning of necessity the decorum that befitted her former station. It is possible, however, that the prophet envisages Babylon simply as a slave and that she crosses the streams on her master's business.

The Lord declares all this to be an expression of his impartial punitive justice. As Baltzer (in loc.) notes, we must put aside modern concepts of vengeance, with their emotional connotations, in reading such passages, because in the OT its whole purpose is to restore the order of law.The prophet follows this by asserting that the judgment is to be understood in the context of his holy and redemptive purpose for Israel. Westermann (in loc.) helpfully comments on v.4: Isaiah's addition of the phrase "Yahweh of hosts [NIV, 'the LORD Almighty'] is deliberate; he was thinking of the importance attaching to the heavenly bodies in Babylon (v.13), but they are no more than the creatures of God, who obey his command (40:26)."

5 – 7 The prophet's interjection in v.4 is parenthetical, for the direct address from God now resumes. From the blare of world publicity and the glare of the

palace lights to the silence of obscurity (v.5), Babylon's dominion was not only over the southern Mesopotamian heartland of her empire but also over many petty kingdoms she had vanquished. This prophecy recognizes that the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the exile of its people must be understood as a divine punishment (v.6; cf. 39:5 – 7 and, for the same principle, 10:5 – 6, 12).

Babylon, however, went too far, and some have suggested that the condition of the exiles may have worsened toward the close of their captivity. Isaiah characteristically underlines not only man's inhumanity to man, in which Amos anticipated him (cf. Am 1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 6 – 8; 4:1; 5:11; 8:4 – 6), but also pride as a major cause of Babylon's judgment (v.7; cf. esp. 13:19; 14:13 – 15).

8 – 11 The accusation of self-sufficient pride already leveled at Babylon is further expounded. This pleasure-loving lady of leisure will soon find herself a childless widow (v.8), her widowhood robbing her of the possibility of further family. Isaiah has already made it plain that sorcery and other ways of trafficking with the forbidden supernatural realm were a cause of God's judgment on his own people (v.9; 2:6; 8:19). For the Babylonians, sorcery also induced a mood of complacency (v.10), because the people relied on their magicians to predict the coming of the enemy and to defeat him. In Babylonia the intellectual and the magical were intertwined, the wise man being instructed in all the arts of the supernatural.

12 – 15 The NIV has very well interpreted the changes of tone to be found in this section, each verse having its own atmosphere. First, in v.12 the prophet taunts Babylon sarcastically. Such a ragbag of spells and magical arts she has accumulated! Could it be that there is an outside chance of success? "Not a hope!" the prophet implies. Then in v.13 he exhorts the experts with the horoscopes to provide deliverance. Babylon, with its astral deities, was the natural home of the astrologer and his kin. The prophet identifies for a moment with the people, besieged with advice from such men and yet with no hope of a remedy for future calamity. In v.13 he says, "Let them save you," and in v.14 he boldly asserts, "They cannot even save themselves."

Verse 14 is dominated by an illustration. The coming of the great judgment is likened to a consuming fire, and the tone of sarcasm returns in the second half of

this verse. They should not mistake the meaning of the illustration. This fire is an enemy, not a friend. The whole history of Babylon's long flirtation with astrology is bluntly dismissed in v.15. All this effort, all this expenditure, and at the end — nothing! Those who have turned from the living God to the daily horoscope in our own society would do well to heed this passage.

NOTE

1 For the description of a city as a מְצוּרִים (*mᵉṣûrîm*), (*bat*, "daughter"), see the Note on 1:8. The NIV's margin ("Or *Chaldeans*; also in verse 5") gives the literal rendering for "Babylonians"; but of course the two terms are virtual synonyms, "Babylonia" originally being the locational designation and "Chaldean" the ethnic one.

J. Israel's Stubbornness and God's Purpose of Grace (48:1 – 22)

OVERVIEW

The integrity of this chapter has been denied ever since Duhm's commentary, especially on account of its "abrupt alternations of mood" (Why-bray, in loc.). It should be remembered, however, that the generally comforting tone of chs. 40 – 48 is punctuated by such passages as 40:21, 27 – 28; 42:18 – 25; 43:22 – 28; 45:9; 46:8 – 12. A degree of oscillation between comfort and rebuke is characteristic of this section. Whybray admits that there are plenty of unifying themes.

1 "Listen to this, O house of Jacob,
you who are called by the name of Israel
and come from the line of Judah,
you who take oaths in the name of the LORD
and invoke the God of Israel —
but not in truth or righ teousness —
2 you who call yourselves citizens of the holy city
and rely on the God of Israel —
the LORD Almighty is his name:
3 I foretold the former things long ago,
my mouth announced them and I made them known;
then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass.
4 For I knew how stubborn you were;
the sinews of your neck were iron,
your forehead was bronze.
5 Therefore I told you these things long ago;
before they happened I announced them to you
so that you could not say,
'My idols did them;
my wooden image and metal god ordained them.'
6 You have heard these things; look at them all.
Will you not admit them?
"From now on I will tell you of new things,
of hidden things unknown to you.
7 They are created now, and not long ago;
you have not heard of them before today.
So you cannot say,

‘Yes, I knew of them.’
8 You have neither heard nor understood;
from of old your ear has not been open.
Well do I know how treacherous you are;
you were called a rebel from birth.
9 For my own name’s sake I delay my wrath;
for the sake of my praise I hold it back from you,
so as not to cut you off.
10 See, I have refi ned you, though not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
11 For my own sake, for my own sake, I do this.
How can I let myself be defamed?
I will not yield my glory to another.
12 “Listen to me, O Jacob,
Israel, whom I have called:
I am he;
I am the first and I am the last.
13 My own hand laid the foundations of the earth,
and my right hand spread out the heavens;
when I summon them,
they all stand up together.
14 “Come together, all of you, and listen:
Which of the idols has foretold these things?
The LORD’s chosen ally
will carry out his purpose against Babylon;
his arm will be against the Babylonians.
15 I, even I, have spoken;
yes, I have called him.
I will bring him,
and he will succeed in his mission.
16 “Come near me and listen to this:
“From the first announcement I have not spoken in secret;
at the time it happens, I am there.”
And now the Sovereign LORD has sent me,
with his Spirit.
17 This is what the LORD says —
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
“I am the LORD your God,
who teaches you what is best for you,
who directs you in the way you should go.
18 If only you had paid attention to my commands,
your peace would have been like a river,
your righteousness like the waves of the sea.
19 Your descendants would have been like the sand,
your children like its numberless grains;
their name would never be cut off

nor destroyed from before me."
20 Leave Babylon,
flee from the Babylonians!
Announce this with shouts of joy
and proclaim it.
Send it out to the ends of the earth;
say,"The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob."
21 They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water fl ow for them from the rock;
he split the rock
and water gushed out.
22 "There is no peace," says the LORD,"for the wicked."

COMMENTARY

1 – 6a The call to "listen" (v.1; cf. vv.12, 14, 16, 18) introduces God's charge that his people are stubborn skeptics. They are described in many different ways here, "all of which are pregnant with theological meaning" (Oswalt, in loc.). They are untrue both to their national names and to their religious profession. The name "Israel" means "he struggles with God" (Ge 32:28 [NIV mg.]; cf. Ro 9:6) and "Judah" means "praise" (Ge 49:8; cf. Ro 2:28 – 29). The people are also proud of their citizenship in the place God has set apart for himself (cf. Isa 52:1; also 1:21, 26).The reality beneath these verbal symbols, however, is lacking.

God's own name has been used in solemn religious vows and in prayer, not in true faith manifested in righteous ness but in presumptuous reliance on mere profession. Isaiah often calls for faith in God, but faith requires proper biblical definition, as James recognized (Jas 2:14 – 26). Let them recall that he is also "the LORD Almighty" (v.2), implying that he may use this great power to bring judgment on them (cf. 1:9, 24 and comments).

Not only are the people stiff-necked and brazen in their attitude toward God's word (v.4), but they also have a chronic tendency to attribute his acts to other gods (v.5; cf. Hos 2:8; see comment on 46:8 – 13). The adjectives "wooden" and "metal" reflect the prophet's contempt for idols (cf. 44:19). Let them admit that he is the God of prophecy and fulfillment and therefore true to his word (v.6a).

6b – 11 From things foretold "long ago" (vv.3, 5), the divine word proceeds to

reveal “new things” (v.6b) — that is, the work of Cyrus (vv.14 – 15) and the Servant of the Lord (v.16; 49:1 – 7). The word *bārā*ʾ (“create”; cf. Ge 1 for God’s creative word) occurs in v.7 to underline the fact that what God has declared is as certain as though it is already fulfilled (cf. Heb 11:1).

But Israel has been rebellious (v.8; cf. 1:2). God did not reveal these things earlier, for he knew how cynically she would react. Her ear was shut to his glad tidings, while, Isaiah will show, the Servant’s will be open to accept his destiny of suffering (50:4). There may be an implied contrast between vv.9 and 11 and vv.1 – 2 (see comments). The people have been untrue to their own name, but — it is strongly emphasized — God will vindicate his own. Rebellious and treacherous they may be, but they will always find him true, upholding the honor of his great name and therefore restraining the full outpouring of his wrath on the people of the promises.

These verses are often regarded as the strongest literary evidence in the book for an exilic date for this section. Oswalt (in loc.) sums up the argument as follows: “If the prophecy concerning Cyrus (the *new things* of verse 6) had been given ca. 700 BC, it could hardly still have been a surprise in 540 BC. And if it was not a surprise in 540, what is the point of this whole section?” In answer he points out that the Bible contains many prophecies that were not taken seriously when their fulfillment came — and that there are striking instances of this in this very book, in the prophecies both of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and of the suffering Savior.

12 – 16 Some have seen the renewed call to “listen” (v.12; cf. v.1) as an indication that this is a separate oracle. More likely, however, it underlines the importance of the three great facts declared here. Baltzer (in loc.) well describes vv.12 – 15 as “a revelatory speech, in which theological approach and tonal form correspond.” The first person singular is frequent and prominent. First, God speaks of himself, his self-existence, his lordship over all history from its beginning to its consummation (v.12), and his creation and present control of all that is (v.13). Then he speaks a word about Cyrus, whom he calls “the LORD’s chosen ally” (v.14; cf. 44:28; 45:1). This makes explicit for the first time that Cyrus’s work will bring down Babylon (vv. l4 – 15; cf. 14:13 – 23).

Finally (v.16), another speaker mysteriously enters the prophecy. This verse

has a number of features that have mystified commentators, who have been puzzled particularly by its final couplet. Oswalt (in loc.) holds that the one sent is the prophet, as he maintains that nothing in the passage requires the Servant interpretation (cf. Calvin, in loc.). Young, Kidner, and most other conservative commentators, however, have argued that the new speaker introduced here (or in the whole verse) is in fact God's "servant," the Servant of the songs. This is also supported by Baltzer, although his reasoning is based on his identification of the Lord's servant with Moses.

The speaker is clearly not simply the Lord, and the phrase "Sovereign LORD" recurs in 50:4 – 5, 7, 9 in the context of the third Servant Song. Unlike the first and fourth songs, where it is God who speaks about him, here, as in the second and third, he himself speaks. Perhaps he is introduced here because Cyrus's work is in fact simply a type of harbinger of the much greater deliverance he as God's Servant will bring to God's people (see esp. the comment at 53:1).

Grammatically, "the Spirit" (v.16; lit., "and his Spirit") can be either a second subject or a second object, but it is almost certainly the latter. North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) says, "In the Old Testament the spirit never sends but is always sent." The NIV's rather free rendering is probably intended to leave open both options of interpretation.

17 – 19 Every sensitive teacher knows the pain of heart that comes when one pours oneself out for students who prove to be unteachable. Israel proved to be so (cf. v.8), and God expresses his deep concern for them. Knight (in loc.) points out, probably correctly, how unfortunate is the RSV's translation "profit" (represented also in the NASB). The NIV's "what is best for you" is no better, for the verb means "to be effective," and the implication is surely "effective for God"!

Verses 18 – 19 record one of the Bible's great cries from the very heart of God (cf. Ge 3:9; Dt 5:28 – 29; Ps 81:13 – 14; Hos 11:8; Lk 13:34 – 35). The language used does not, in fact, exclude all possibility of penitent amendment, as though all hope had gone. The similes speak of abundance, and the whole passage stresses the contingent nature of God's blessings, even some that have been the subject of his own promises (v.19; cf. Ge 22:17). Divine grace can of course so work within the heart that promises seemingly uncertain of fulfillment are made

sure by the regenerative work of the Spirit.

20 – 22 This dramatic passage anticipates the call given in 52:11 – 12 (but see comment there). The military-style command is explicit and urgent and is associated with a call to all the earth to praise God for his redeeming grace to Israel. The “shouts of joy” (v.20) are, of course, perfectly natural, and those who have suffered internment in prison camps in our own day know how deep such joy can be. Verse 21 suddenly moves from the future to the past, for the people’s confidence in God as their Redeemer from Babylon is to be based on his redeeming love demonstrated at the exodus and his care of his people during their journey through the wilderness.

In such a context v.22 may seem harsh, but the prophet is a realist and knows the unbelief with which many of the people will view this vision; for, as he has shown earlier in the chapter, their skepticism was endemic. Also, and perhaps even more significantly, physical deliverance does not inevitably deal with moral and spiritual problems, and the people back in the land, free from Babylon, are not free from sin. As Motyer (1993, in loc.) puts it, “to come home to Canaan is not to come back to God.” Knight (in loc.) is emphatic that this verse is “no editorial comment, as some would have us believe, written in by a pious scribe. . . . It is a reiteration for great effect of the subject brought forward at the beginning of the chapter in verse 1.” This then prepares us for the great promise of deliverance from sin presented in 52:13 – 53:12.

NOTES

1 “The line of Judah” —מִמֵּי יְהוּדָה (*mimmê y'hûdâ*) — is literally “the waters of Judah,” which could be a euphemism for semen; or else after the model of Deuteronomy 33:28; Psalm 68:26 (lit., “fountain of Israel”), Judah is pictured as the spring from which the stream of the people took its rise. Conjectural emendation is not needed.

4 Some commentators point out that the language here is more characteristic of Ezekiel, but this could suggest the dependence of the later prophet on the earlier and need not imply the work of another hand.

8 The active verb פָּתְחָה (*pitḥâ*, “open”), though unusual, should be retained as giving emphasis to the fact that their deafness was culpable.

10 The words “though not as silver” are difficult. In their context they probably mean that God has chastened the people in a way that can be likened to the methods used for refining silver but that, because of their obstinacy, the desired results have not been achieved. See the note in Oswalt (in loc.), who takes a different view, i.e., that God chooses to refine rather than destroy them. For Egypt as the furnace of affliction, see Deuteronomy 4:20; 1 Kings 8:51; Jeremiah 11:4.

14 The NIV inserts “the idols” to make explicit what is clearly implicit here (cf. 41:22).

16 The call to “listen” here may be compared with 49:1 and raises the possibility that the whole verse, not just its closing couplet, may relate to the Servant of the Lord. It would make the reference less abrupt but no less impressive. It also suggests a possible contrast between speaking in secret here and being concealed in God’s quiver in the later passage, suggesting perhaps that the latter should be understood relatively, not absolutely.

VIII. The Gospel of the Servant of the Lord (49:1 – 55:13)

OVERVIEW

There certainly seems to be a change in the book between chs. 48 and 49, for in chs. 40 – 48 there is much about Babylon, Cyrus, and the idols, while in this new section there is no explicit reference to any of these (not even in 52:11 – 12), although the background still seems to be exile and captivity. Instead we find three important Servant passages.

A. The Lord's Servant and the Restoration of Israel (49:1 – 26)

OVERVIEW

For general discussion of the so-called Servant Songs and their interpretation, the reader should consult the Introduction, pp. 453 – 62. This is the second of the songs, though, as we have suggested at 48:16, this passage is anticipated not only by ch. 42 but also possibly by that verse.

1 Listen to me, you islands;
    hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the LORD called me;
    from my birth he has made mention of my name.
2 He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
    in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
    and concealed me in his quiver.
3 He said to me, "You are my servant,
    Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."
4 But I said, "I have labored to no purpose;
    I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.
Yet what is due me is in the LORD's hand,
    and my reward is with my God."
5 And now the LORD says —
    he who formed me in the womb to be his servant
to bring Jacob back to him
    and gather Israel to himself,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD
    and my God has been my strength —
6 he says:
"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
    to restore the tribes of Jacob
    and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
    that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."
7 This is what the LORD says —
    the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel —
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
    to the servant of rulers:
"Kings will see you and rise up,

princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

8 This is what the LORD says:
“In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

9 to say to the captives, ‘Come out,’
and to those in darkness, ‘Be free!’
“They will feed beside the roads and
find pasture on every barren hill.

10 They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.
He who has compassion on them
will guide them and lead them beside springs of water.

11 I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.

12 See, they will come from afar —
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan.”

13 Shout for joy, O heavens;
rejoice, O earth;
burst into song, O mountains!
For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

14 But Zion said, “The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.”

15 “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

16 See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

17 Your sons hasten back,
and those who laid you waste depart from you.

18 Lift up your eyes and look around;
all your sons gather and come to you.
As surely as I live,” declares the LORD,
“you will wear them all as ornaments;
you will put them on, like a bride.

19 “Though you were ruined and made desolate
and your land laid waste,
now you will be too small for your people,
and those who devoured you will be far away.

20 The children born during your bereavement
will yet say in your hearing,
‘This place is too small for us;
give us more space to live in.’
21 Then you will say in your heart,
‘Who bore me these?
I was bereaved and barren;
I was exiled and rejected.
Who brought these up?
I was left all alone,
but these — where have they come from?’ ”
22 This is what the Sovereign LORD says:
“See, I will beckon to the Gentiles,
I will lift up my banner to the peoples;
they will bring your sons in their arms
and carry your daughters on their shoulders.
23 Kings will be your foster fathers,
and their queens your nursing mothers.
They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;
they will lick the dust at your feet.
Then you will know that I am the LORD;
those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”
24 Can plunder be taken from warriors,
or captives rescued from the fierce?
25 But this is what the LORD says:
“Yes, captives will be taken from warriors,
and plunder retrieved from the fierce;
I will contend with those who contend with you,
and your children I will save.
26 I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh;
they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine.
Then all mankind will know
that I, the LORD, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

COMMENTARY

1 – 7 Oswalt (in loc.) points out that although a new section of the book starts with v.1, there are close connections with what went before, and these are sometimes overlooked. He notes especially the call to “listen” (48:1, 12, 16; 49:1) and the reference to a message for “the ends of the earth” (48:20; 49:6). Although a collective interpretation of this passage is not impossible and is naturally suggested by a consideration of v.3, a straightforward application to

Israel is ruled out by vv.5 – 7. The (probably intended) result is that the reader is forced by the material itself to face the question, Who is this servant?

If, as we suggested in the introduction to ch. 42, the first song can be viewed as contemplating the ministry of Jesus the Servant in prospect from the perspective of his baptism, this second song seems to be looking back on that ministry from its close, or, as Motyer (1999, in loc.) suggests:

> Throughout the Gospels Jesus faced rejection, unbelief, prejudice and misunderstanding. He cried out, "How long . .. ?" (Lk. 9:41), was grieved by his disciples' failure to understand (Mk. 8:21), and foresaw the falling away of the core group (Mk. 14:27). Perhaps what is thus diffused throughout Jesus' ministry is, so to speak, compressed by Isaiah into this single utterance.

The "distant nations" are to benefit from the Servant's work, so he calls them to listen (v.1). This itself harmonizes with the prophetic ministry he was predestined to (cf. Jer 1:4 – 5). Isaiah's illustrative gift can be seen in v.2, where the penetrating character of the Servant's message is likened to two sharp weapons, while the implications of the second are developed to bring out a further point. Concealment in the quiver suggests, as does v.1 more literally, an eternal purpose manifest at the appropriate time (cf. 1Pe 1:20).

Isaiah 42:18 – 20 presented Israel as the deaf and blind servant of the Lord, and 44:21 – 23 assures us that nevertheless God intends to display his glory in Israel his servant. Here (v.3) that promise is reiterated. Matthew saw Jesus as the expression of God's mind for Israel, as his quotation of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15 makes clear, and the gospel of John asserts that God's glory is revealed in him (e.g., Jn 1:14; 2:11). Jesus, even more than Nathanael, is "a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false" (1:47).

G. P. Hugenberger ("The Servant of the Lord in the 'Servant Songs' of Isaiah: A Second Moses Figure," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Texts* [ed. P. E. Satterthwaite, R. S. Hess, and G. J. Wenham (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995)], 109) says, "Given the well-established dual usage of the term 'Israel' elsewhere, where it can refer either to the individual patriarch or to the nation of which he was the progenitor, there can be no inherent objection to a similar dual usage of this term within Isaiah, where it bears both an individual and a collective reference." The close of the ministry of Jesus saw the great crowds of Galilean days no longer thronging him, the official religious leaders

plotting his death, and the disciples forsaking him in the face of danger; but God would reward him (v.4; cf. Heb 12:2).

Verse 5 makes it clear that the Servant is not Israel per se, for he has a ministry to Israel. Is he then a personification of the faithful remnant? This has been argued by a number of writers (e.g., Knight, in loc.), but the reiterated reference to his birth (vv.1, 5) most naturally suggests he is a person rather than a corporate group.

The people may despise him (v.7), but God will honor him. Honor is shown in the range of his ministry, for through it he will in fact be brought to great honor before the world's kings and princes. The phrase "and now" (v.5) suggests the transition from the limited ministry of the Gospels to the more extensive proclamation of his gospel through the apostles in Acts. The words of v.6 — "it is too small a thing" — suggest an estimate of his person or of his work or of perhaps both. The restoration of the remnant — mentioned often in Isaiah (e.g., 11:10 – 16) — is to be expounded later in this chapter. Israel has light but needs restoration, while the Gentiles need both light and salvation.

The church's mission to the Gentiles is to be viewed in the context of the mission of Jesus himself (cf. Jn 20:21) and is to the uttermost parts of the earth (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:47; Ac 1:8). Accordingly, Paul and Barnabas could apply the words of v.6 to themselves (Ac 13:46 – 47). The Nunc Dimittis, on the other hand, applies this verse to Jesus himself (Lk 2:32). This means that we have NT warrant for interpreting this second song both individually and collectively, with the second emerging out of the first.

Verse 7 prepares for the third and fourth songs. The unique Servant's ministry is in fact rejected by the nation of Israel (cf., e.g., Ro 9 – 11). Great as he was, he came as a subject, not only of God himself but also of earthly rulers such as Augustus, Tiberius, and Herod. As a result of his work, the highest of men and women will not only stand in respect and perhaps amazement but, even more appropriately, will also bow low in worship and submission.

8 – 12 Although the opening words of v.8 certainly appear to mark a new beginning, almost a fresh oracle, they present a contrast with v.7. So often in the NT, especially in Acts, it is said that the Christ, rejected and crucified by men,

was raised and thus vindicated by God (e.g., Ac 2:23 – 24).The favor of God to the unique Servant is, of course, merited, but the quotation of v.8 in 2 Corinthi ans 6:2 shows that in Christ we share not only his service (see comment on v.6) but also his acceptance (cf. Eph 1:6, KJV).

The background to the expression “the time of my favor” (v.8) is probably the day of Jubilee in Leviticus 25:8 – 55 (cf. 61:1 – 2 and comments; for the covenantal reference, see comment on 42:6). The context here suggests that part of the Servant’s work is to establish the aspects of the Abrahamic and possibly the Mosaic covenants that related to the land of Canaan. Children and a land were major blessings of the covenant with Abraham (Ge 12:2 – 3); the first is mentioned in Isaiah 48:19 and the second here. The Servant will be a kind of second Joshua (the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek “Jesus”). The land will be re peopled by freed captives (v.9a).

The new conditions of the people are beautifully described in vv.9b – 12. They are first pictured like sheep finding abundant pasture in a formerly barren land (the “desolate inheritances” of v.8). In this land they will find food, water, and shelter (v.10). They will be guided by a compassionate shepherd (cf. Ps 23). These verses are echoed and applied to Christ in Revelation 7:16 – 17. The pastoral imagery is then replaced by assurances of suitable road conditions (v.11) and of a return from every quarter (v.12), already familiar to us from 35:8; 40:3 – 4; 42:16; 43:5 – 7. The application of such passages is discussed in the Introduction, pp. 450 – 52.

13 – 21 The news of deliverance from Babylon is to be proclaimed with joy to the ends of the earth (48:20); now the heavens and the earth, in true Isaianic fashion, are called to praise the Lord (v.13; cf. 44:23). The note of comfort with which ch. 40 opened returns, but now the prophet confronts the people’s discouragement.

Verse 14, like 40:9 (cf. also 44:26 – 28), speaks not of Israel but of Zion. Baltzer points out that in Deutero-Isaiah from 49:14 onward Zion/Jerusalem is the goal of longing and hope and is much more frequently mentioned than Israel.This is in fact true right to the close of Isaiah’s book. In some ways this is not unlike the identification of the people of Jesus (presumably Israel) as “his own” in John 1:11, and then the focus on his disciples as “his own” in John 13:1.

At the time of the return from the exile, the Holy City will be in ruins, its walls reduced to rubble. The Lord assures her that he has not forgotten her. He uses two telling illustrations, the first particularly striking, as there is so much use of the feminine singular in relation to Zion in this chapter, but now God is pictured as a mother (v.15). Motherly love is proverbial in every culture; God's love for this city and its people go well beyond this. Verse 16 may have tattooing in view (see K&D, 2:269; but cf. Lev 19:28). The walls of Jerusalem will not even exist at the time of the return, but God's people have been and are yet to be engraved on his hands.

Abraham was told to lift up his eyes to look at the Promised Land (Ge 13:14); now Zion is to look up to see her restored citizens coming from every quarter (v.18). In another beautiful image God pictures Zion as proudly putting on her citizens, like a bride her jewels. In fact, the numbers coming will be so great that the city will not be able to house them all (v.19; cf. 54:2 – 3).Young (in loc.) well sums up vv.20 – 21:"Zion regarded herself as a widow; as a matter of fact her Husband, the Lord, had not forsaken or forgotten her. The children who will one day crowd to her are legitimate children, begotten through a lively faith."

22 – 23 Earlier in the chapter, the Servant is told that kings and princes will give him respect and submission. His people will have their share also; for not only will the Gentile nations rally to God's banner (v.22), tenderly bringing the exiled Israelites with them (cf. 11:10 – 12; contrast 5:26), but their exalted monarchs, with all the gentle care of parents, will also do obeisance (v.23). They will recognize the special place of Israel. The Lord made himself known to Israel at the exodus (Ex 6:7; et al.). God will not fail his people who trust in him (cf. 28:16).

If v.23 reads like arrogant nationalism, we should note, as Knight (in loc.) points out, that "you" and "your feet" employ the feminine singular (which occurs frequently in this chapter and the opening of the next), referring to Zion as the Bride of God, so these kings and queens "are in fact bowing down to God-in-Israel (v.7), the Husband of the Bride. Then *you* (feminine singular) will know that I AM YAHWEH, the Lord who is utterly faithful to his covenant partner."

24 – 26 Echoes of the exodus constantly appear in this part of Isaiah. Those

who read the question of v.24 will certainly recall that this is exactly what God did when he delivered his people from Egypt, the house of bondage. Moreover, on that occasion not only did God make himself known to Israel but also to the Egyptians, and the greater redemption from oppression promised here will also lead to a wider recognition that God is — but this time by all humankind.Verse 26a is a graphic and gruesome way of indicating the utter desperation of the enemies of Israel, overcome with hunger and thirst, in contrast to Israel's promised condition (vv.9 – 11).

NOTES

3 This is the most difficult verse in the Servant Songs for the individual interpretation. Many commentators have argued against the authenticity of the word "Israel" here, but the evidence against it is weak (it is only absent from one MS of the MT) unless it be thought impossible for the Servant to be Israel and to have a mission to Israel at the same time. The Introduction (pp. 453 – 62) suggests a solution that treats the text seriously.

5 Baltzer (in loc.), who views the whole of Deutero-Isaiah as a festal drama and this particular passage as set in the underworld, points out that MT reads part of this verse as "And/But Israel, it will not be gathered," and says, "If . . . the action takes place in the underworld . . . it would be superfluous to indicate a particular place for 'gather.' The meaning would be: Israel is *not* to disappear in the underworld like other peoples, for example, Babylon (47:1 – 14)." He then goes on to link this to his identification of the servant with Moses by referring to the story of the Korahites in Numbers 16 and 17. Such comments show how drastically an unproven assumption can affect the interpretation of a passage. Baltzer also comments, however, that the MT proposes a Qere, based on reading לֹא (*lō*) not as "not" but as "to him" (see NIV), and thinks this artistic "ambivalence" reflects the prophet's own intention.

7 בְּזֹה־נֶפֶשׁ (*bᵉzōh-nepeš*,', "despised" [NIV]) is literally "a despising of soul." 1QIsa et al. read בְּזוּי נֶפֶשׁ (*bᵉzûy-nepeš*, "despised of soul"), which may be correct.

12 זְבוּב יָמוּת (*zᵉbûb yāmût*, has long puzzled commentators (cf. NIV mg.), some taking it to refer to China. 1QIsa reads סוניים (*swnyym*), which is close to סוניים (*swnyym*),

a conjectural emendation often accepted by commentators. This would mean the people of Syene or Aswan (cf. Eze 29:10), which is followed by the NIV. Jeremiah (Jer 44:1) refers to Jews in his day living in this area of Lower Egypt.

13 Baltzer (in loc.) sees the references to heavens, earth, and mountains as musical directions (high, low, and middle register respectively) for those who played in the festal drama. This assumption is gratuitous, and it is notable that he gives no arguments for his view.

17 The NIV's "your sons" follows the MT's בָּנַיִךְ (*bānāyik*), while 1QIsa and some versions repoint it as *bōnāyik* ("your builders"), which is followed by the NASB. Either is possible, for in either case there could be intentional paronomasia.

24 The NIV margin provides variant readings of this verse. See Oswalt (in loc.) for discussion of these. He supports the reading found in the DSS, LXX, Vulgate, and Syriac, i.e., the reading followed in the NIV.

B. Israel's Sin and the Servant's Obedience (50:1 – 11)

OVERVIEW

Here, as in ch. 42, the true Servant of God appears in a context speaking of rebellious Israel, named also as God's servant in the earlier passage (42:19). Here, as in 49:3, 6, the Servant is the perfect expression of God's mind for Israel. The imperfect servant, though not so named, appears in vv.1 – 3 and 11, and the perfect in vv.4 – 10.

The chapter provides an interesting study in the prophet's use of questions. In v.1 Isaiah queries assumptions made by his hearers; in v.2 he uses questions to level accusations at them; in vv.8 – 9 his questions are exclamatory and exultant expressions of faith; and in v.10 they suggest a reply enabling him to identify a particular group among his hearers.

1 This is what the LORD says:
"Where is your mother's certificate of divorce
with which I sent her away?
Or to which of my creditors
did I sell you?
Because of your sins you were sold;
because of your transgressions your mother was sent away.
2 When I came, why was there no one?
When I called, why was there no one to answer?
Was my arm too short to ransom you?
Do I lack the strength to rescue you?
By a mere rebuke I dry up the sea,
I turn rivers into a desert;
their fish rot for lack of water
and die of thirst.
3 I clothe the sky with darkness
and make sackcloth its covering."
4 The Sovereign LORD has given me an instructed tongue,
to know the word that sustains the weary.
He wakens me morning by morning,
wakens my ear to listen like one being taught.
5 The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears,

and I have not been rebellious;
I have not drawn back.
6 I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.
7 Because the Sovereign LORD helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.
8 He who vindicates me is near.
Who then will bring charges against me?
Let us face each other!
Who is my accuser?
Let him confront me!
9 It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.
Who is he that will condemn me?
They will all wear out like a garment;
the moths will eat them up.
10 Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the word of his servant?
Let him who walks in the dark,
who has no light,
trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.
11 But now, all you who light fires
and provide yourselves with flaming torches,
go, walk in the light of your fires
and of the torches you have set ablaze.
This is what you shall receive from my hand:
You will lie down in torment.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 The figures of divorce and debt set forth Israel's conception of the Lord's relationship to her (v.1). Exiled, she assumes that he has cast her off (cf. 40:27); but God her husband (cf. Jer 31:32) has not divorced her or sold her to pay off his debts, for he, the Creator, has none. The cause of the exile is simply sin on Israel's part; and, it is implied, if she returns to God, he will restore her.

Verse 2 rebukes Israel's unbelief. Through the prophets God has called to the people but found no answering response of obedient faith (cf. 48:8). Their unbelief has closed to them the book of redemptive history, along with its

lessons. The end of this verse clearly refers to the exodus; see especially the reference to “my arm” (cf. Ex 15:16; Dt 26:8; Ps 77:15). “A mere rebuke” suggests how simple an act of deliverance is for God. The argument from history is reinforced from nature, itself affected by the events associated with the exodus. The judgment on the Nile and the clothing of the sky’s naked brightness with darkness (v.3; cf. 45:7) are fit symbols of God’s power to judge Israel’s enemies

.**4 – 9** Smart (in loc.) says of ch. 50:

> We sense an increasing tension as we read it, an ominous note foreshadowing rejection, bitter conflict, and deep suffering. It is a kind of forecourt of chapter 53, and we are not likely to see far into the later chapter unless we interpret the earlier one rightly, just as the story of the cross in the Gospels discloses its profound significance only to the reader who has grasped something of the nature of the conflict in which Jesus’ mission involved him with the religious and political forces of his time.

Although there is no explicit reference to the Servant in these verses (but see v.10), there are many links with the other songs and also — through the first person singular and the use of the expression “the Sovereign LORD” (v.4) — to 48:16. This divine title (“Adonai Yahweh”) also binds this song together, occurring in four of its six verses.

At once the reader is conscious of a contrast with vv.1 – 3. Here is response to God’s word (cf.v.2 and 42:18 – 20). The second song stressed the penetrating power of the word the Servant transmits (49:2), while this song shows its pastoral effectiveness (cf. Mt 11:28 – 30 and Isa 40:27 – 31). As Thexton (in loc.) says, “The Servant of God has the ‘trained tongue’ and the ‘trained ear.’ The ‘training’ is not, however, the gaining of a technique, but the practice of discipleship.” He waits on God in the morning watch (cf., e.g., Mk 1:35). The word he speaks comes from the God who sent him (cf. Jn 7:16 – 18).We may agree with Baltzer (in loc.) that the intimacy with God suggested here is somewhat reminiscent of the face-to-face intimacy of God and Moses (Dt 34:10) without accepting his identification of the servant with Moses. After all, Jesus was both the prophet like Moses and the Servant of the Lord.

Israel is rebellious (cf. 1:2; 48:8), but the Servant is responsive even when a destiny of suffering and shame is the subject of God’s word to him (v.5). As

God's Servant, he does not draw back but "offers"his body to the tormentors (v.6). Perhaps not even in ch. 53 are we more conscious of the gospel story (cf. Mt 26:67; 27:30; Mk 15:19; Lk 22:63). A combination of pain and shame introduce the Servant's conviction that the disgrace these suggest must yield place to a glorious vindication (cf. 52:13;53:12). His face, cruelly assaulted, will not flinch before suffering (v.7; cf. Lk 9:51, where the RSV translates, "he set his face").

Even in this, however, though the individualization reaches a high point and really demands fulfillment in a special person (see Introduction, pp. 453 – 62), we are reminded of the picture of afflicted Israel in Psalm 129. Herbert (in loc.) reminds us of other comparisons, when he writes: "There are many points of resemblance to Jeremiah's confessions (cf.Job 30f.) and the psalms in which the individual cries out to God for help, e.g., Ps 22." The Servant, however, is the innocent sufferer *par eminence*

.God helps Israel (43:2, 5; 44:2) and Cyrus (45:1, 5); he will also help his unique Servant (v.8; cf. 43:1). The NT preaching constantly emphasizes the vindication by God through resurrection of the despised and suffering Jesus (Ac 2:23 – 24; 3:15; 13:29 – 30; et al.). Here, however, there is no indication of the form the divine vindication takes. The setting of vv.8 – 9 is clearly forensic, and the trials of Jesus in the Gospels make this peculiarly appropriate. He, too, could confront his enemies with the challenge, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (Jn 8:46). For the analogy v.9 closes with, see the comment at 51:6, 8.

10 – 11 Many modern commentators deny the integrity of these verses with the rest of the chapter, attributing them to a later hand, largely because they seem alien to a prophet of consolation. But Smart (in loc.) is surely correct when he speaks of

> the appropriateness of the verses as the conclusion of a chapter in which the gulf between the Servant and Israel in its unbelief has become distressingly wide. If the prophet's message of hope was met with a solid wall of scorn and rejection, as the chapter seems to suggest, it is not surprising that an actual division should have begun to be apparent between those who fear the Lord and obey the voice of his Servant and those who heap upon the Servant only ridicule and humiliation.

The people who obey are, in fact, identifying themselves with the Servant's own attitude (cf. v.5) and so expressing their reverential fear of God (cf. Dt

18:15 – 18; Lk 9:34 – 35). This fear is not one that makes people hide (cf. 2:10 – 11, 19 – 21) but one that draws them to God in faith.

Verse 10b perhaps calls for repentance, for it speaks of walking in darkness and offers, by implication, light from God through the word of the Servant (cf. Jn 12:44 – 46). The modern reader needs to remember that in biblical times, a source of light also served as a source of heat; so the analogy of v.11 develops that which brings v.10 to its close. It may be compared with 10:17 and furnishes a striking link in imagery between parts of the book so often attributed to two distinct authors (see Introduction, pp. 438 – 48). It also reminds us of 1:29 – 31, teaching as it does that the wicked man will be caught in his own trap. For vv.10 – 11, compare also Psalm 2:10 – 12.

If these verses carry the same theme as vv.4 – 9, the identification of the servant with Israel appears to be impossible, for the first clause of v.10 must apply to people within Israel. Even an application to a faithful remnant is difficult, for this would make the servant and those who fear the Lord identical.

NOTES

1 This verse alludes to the divorce legislation of Deuteronomy 24:1 – 4.

11 The NIV follows the KJV in assuming אוֹר (*ʾôr*, “light”), rather than the MT’s אוּר (*ʾûr*,“flame”), which seems fully appropriate and should be retained. As Whybray (in loc.) puts it, “MT is correct: those who have started the fire will be caught by it and will find themselves unable to escape its flames.” Then, “unable to escape from it, the arsonists will writhe in agony on the ground.” The fire, then, will be either their rebellion in general or some special manifestation of it, perhaps in despising and persecuting the Servant.

C. Listen! Awake! Depart! (51:1 – 52:12)

OVERVIEW

The sensitive reader of Scripture becomes aware in its pages, not only of the communication of truth, but also of differences in emotional tone and atmosphere. The climax of the servant theme and, indeed, of the Christological theme generally in this book (see Introduction, pp. 453 – 62) is being prepared for in this passage. There is a sense of impending climax, like that to be found in certain other OT passages (e.g., Ge 44; Ex 19; and Job 37), and this is marked by certain literary features.

This section of the prophecy contains an unusual number of imperatives; and there are several series of verbs and their synonyms, so that there is a call to listen (51:1, 4, 7, 21; 52:8), to awake (51:9; 52:1; cf. 51:17), to look (51:1 – 2, 6), and, finally to depart (52:11). Some of these commands occur in immediately doubled form (always an indication of emotion in a writer or speaker); and once the imperative is threefold, though in this case it is addressed to God, not human beings (51:9). There are rhetorical questions (51:9 – 10, 12 – 14; 52:5), allusions to ch. 40, itself sure to have roused much feeling in its first readers (cf. esp. 52:7, 9 and 40:1, 9), and also many great statements about God and promises of what he will do. There are in fact many allusions to earlier parts of Isaiah in this section, and all this encourages in the discerning reader an anticipation of a great climax.

1 “Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
2 look to Abraham, your father,
and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was but one,
and I blessed him and made him many.
3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;
he will make her deserts like Eden,
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.

Joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the sound of singing.
4 “Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
The law will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
5 My righteous ness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.
The islands will look to me
and wait in hope for my arm.
6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
look at the earth beneath;
the heavens will vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment
and its inhabitants die like flies.
But my salvation will last forever,
my righteousness will never fail.
7 “Hear me, you who know what is right,
you people who have my law in your hearts:
Do not fear the reproach of men
or be terrified by their insults.
8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment;
the worm will devour them like wool.
But my righteousness will last forever,
my salvation through all generations.”
9 Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength,
O arm of the LORD;
awake, as in days gone by,
as in generations of old.
Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?
10 Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?
11 The ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will fl ee away.
12 “I, even I, am he who comforts you.
Who are you that you fear mortal men,
the sons of men, who are but grass,
13 that you forget the LORD your Maker,
who stretched out the heavens

and laid the foundations of the earth,
that you live in constant terror every day
because of the wrath of the oppressor,
who is bent on destruction?
For where is the wrath of the oppressor?
14 The cowering prisoners will soon be set free;
they will not die in their dungeon,
nor will they lack bread.
15 For I am the LORD your God,
who churns up the sea so that its waves roar —
the LORD Almighty is his name.
16 I have put my words in your mouth
and covered you with the shadow of my hand —
I who set the heavens in place,
who laid the foundations of the earth,
and who say to Zion, ‘You are my people.’ ”
17 Awake, awake!
Rise up, O Jerusalem,
you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD
the cup of his wrath,
you who have drained to its dregs
the goblet that makes men stagger.
18 Of all the sons she bore
there was none to guide her;
of all the sons she reared
there was none to take her by the hand.
19 These double calamities have come upon you —
who can comfort you? —
ruin and destruction, famine and sword —
who can console you?
20 Your sons have fainted;
they lie at the head of every street,
like antelope caught in a net.
They are filled with the wrath of the LORD
and the rebuke of your God.
21 Therefore hear this, you afflicted one,
made drunk, but not with wine.
22 This is what your Sovereign LORD says,
your God, who defends his people:
“See, I have taken out of your hand
the cup that made you stagger;
from that cup, the goblet of my wrath,
you will never drink again.
23 I will put it into the hands of your tormentors,
who said to you,
‘Fall prostrate that we may walk over you.’
And you made your back like the ground,

like a street to be walked over."
52:1 Awake, awake, O Zion,
clothe yourself with strength.
Put on your garments of splendor,
O Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled
will not enter you again.
2 Shake off your dust;
rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains on your neck,
O captive Daughter of Zion.
3 For this is what the LORD says:
"You were sold for nothing,
and without money you will be redeemed."
4 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
"At first my people went down to Egypt to live;
lately, Assyria has oppressed them.
5 "And now what do I have here?" declares the LORD.
"For my people have been taken away for nothing,
and those who rule them mock,"
declares the LORD.
"And all day long
my name is constantly blasphemed.
6 Therefore my people will know my name;
therefore in that day they will know
that it is I who foretold it.
Yes, it is I."
7 How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"
8 Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the LORD returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.
9 Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
10 The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

11 Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing!
Come out from it and be pure,
you who carry the vessels of the LORD.
12 But you will not leave in haste
or go in flight;
for the LORD will go before you,
the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 The prophet calls for maximum attention (v.1), the concentration of both the literal ear as well as the eye of the imagination (cf. Mk 4:3, where "listen" is literally, "listen, look!"). His call is, in other phraseology, to those who fear the Lord (50:10). The people are to reflect on their origins, for this will encourage them as they await his coming deliverance from Babylon. The Lord brought this nation into being from such small beginnings in fulfillment of his promises; and so, it is implied, he is able still to translate his word into events.

The Jewish Midrash on v.1 reads as follows: "When God looked on Abraham who was to appear, he said, 'Behold, I have found a rock on which I can build and base the world,' therefore he called Abraham a rock" (SBK 1:733). Cullmann has suggested that this passage and its midrashic interpretation may lie behind Matthew 16:18, with Peter — representing the apostles as the first Christian believers — paralleling Abraham as father of the faithful, but for the new covenant. Just as Abraham's faith in God was a pattern for the OT community that succeeded him (and, of course, for Chris tians, too), so that of Peter and his fellow apostles in Christ will lead to the building of the church (see O. Cullmann, *Peter, Disciple, Apostle, Martyr* [Lon-don: SCM, 1953], 193).

God's promise to Abraham included a land as well as a people (cf. Ge 17:1 – 8).The capital city of that land is now in ruins and its environs reduced to a wasteland, but God will comfort her (v.3; cf. 40:1 – 9) by transforming her land and giving her a voice to praise him. Genesis has been in view in the reference to Abraham and Sarah (v.2); it is mentioned again when the prophet alludes to the garden of Eden, an allusion incidentally that was clearly meaningful to the first readers of the prophecy. The language of v.3 powerfully reminds us both of 40:1 and ch. 35.

4 – 6 Baltzer (in loc.) rightly describes these verses as an extremely dense text in which a whole worldview is developed. The God of Israel addresses his own people, but he speaks about the nations, then about the heavens and the earth, and finally about his saving acts for his people. The NIV uses the word “my” nine times in these verses, thus presenting a most vivid impression of the personal activity of God on behalf of his people. The Lord will in fact manifest his own righ teousness to those who are pursuing it (v.5; cf. v.1).

The Lord declared at 2:3 – 4 that his law would go out to the nations, so creating justice among them. The first Servant Song shows that the Servant is the mediator of this divine justice (42:1). Here we see that the law, justice, righteous ness, and salvation are all to be widely disseminated throughout the nations. This combination of terms certainly suggests that there is going to be a thorough reordering of human life among the nations on the basis of God’s own character, revealed in his law, expressed in his righteous ness, and taking the form of salvation. Salvation and righteous ness are clearly closely parallel ideas here, providing a background for the Pauline doctrine of salvation as righteous-ness (e.g., Ro 1:16 – 17). Whether passages such as this are to be understood in terms of international relations or are to be taken as pictures of spiritual salvation, or both, is taken up in the Introduction (pp. 450 – 52).

In v.5, the NASB’s rendering of “arms” followed by “arm” correctly represents the Hebrew, and Motyer (1993, in loc.) sees the plural here to be a deliberate counterpoise to the later singular, which prompts questions and excites expectation of some special personal manifestation of God’s power. How special, indeed unique, this manifestation is will come plainly into view in 53:1.

In v.6, the prophet calls on Israel — already addressed at the beginning of v.4 — to consider the universe.The heavens and the earth that seem to be so stable are in fact less enduring than the salvation God has promised (cf. Mk 13:31).

7 – 8 These verses open with a call identical in substance, though not in language, with v.1. Here, as in vv.4 – 5, there is a close link between righteous ness and the law of God, for the law publishes God’s right way for people. The heart is where God’s law should be (cf. Dt 30:14), and, of course, the new covenant pledges that it will be written there (Jer 31:31 – 34).The prophet

assumes that the righteous in the land will experience antagonism from the wicked, which can be copiously illustrated from the Psalter and finds its ultimate illustration in human antagonism to the Christ-Servant of God. Like the visible universe (v.8; cf. v.6), the wicked will perish. The only abiding realities in God's new order are his own righteous ness and salvation.Verse 8b repeats this assurance from v.6.

9 – 11 Characteristically, prophets stood facing the people and addressed them for God. They must often have prayed, however, for those to whom they were sent (cf., e.g., 1Sa 7:8, Am 7:1 – 6). Here Isaiah prays wonderfully, with great urgency expressed in the threefold cry, "Awake!" (v.9). God has given wonderful promises to his people. The prophet has been the inspired channel of these and now cries to God for their fulfillment. A new revelation of the power of his arm has been promised (cf. v.5 and the comment at 50:2).

This power has already been manifested in the destruction of Egypt's power, for Rahab, originally the monstrous sea goddess destroyed by Marduk according to Canaanite and Babylonian mythology, is a symbol of that land (see Note at 27:1; comment on 30:7). Here is praying indeed, in which God's great deeds in the past (v.10) are made the basis of prayerful confidence in his power to act again for his people. Once before the people entered the Promised Land with joy, and they will do so again (v.11; cf. v.3).

12 – 16 God here begins to answer his people's cry, expressed through the prophet in the previous three verses. He rebukes them for their lack of faith (v.12). As he has been telling them ever since the opening of ch. 40, he is going to make himself known to them as their divine comforter. The repeated "I" serves to heighten the contrast between "the LORD your Maker" (v.13) and the "mortal men" they have been afraid of (cf. 40:6 – 8). Who are the oppressors mentioned here? Presumably they are the Babylonians, though there is of course an important general principle here also.

The"cowering prisoners" (v.14) are unlikely to be the people as a whole, for the oppression in Babylon was nothing as severe as that in Egypt. Possibly the phrase refers to a group of hostages imprisoned as surety of the good behavior of the remainder. If so, v.14 may reflect their fears that death or starvation will overcome them before their release.

Verse 16 is apparently an allusion to the Servant of the Lord (cf. 49:2), another indication that he is to be found outside the Servant Songs (cf. perhaps 48:16). The NASB is decidedly more literal than the NIV here, and, as Oswalt (in loc.) points out, the words of a prophet cannot plant a new heaven and found a new earth. If this planting and founding are in prospect rather than in the past, as the language seems to suggest, this looks like an anticipation of 65:17 and 66:22. Who then is this whose words can effect such awesome and distinctively divine acts? No wonder the New Testament writers do not hesitate to associate the work of creation and new creation with Christ (e.g., Jn 1:1 – 18; 2Co 5:18)!

17 – 20 Chapter 40 opened with a declaration that the God of punitive wrath would reveal himself also as the God of comfort. The references to his wrath here are appropriate, therefore, in a context that speaks also of his comfort (cf. v.12). The repeated imperative of v.17 must surely be the divine call to Jerusalem that answers the call of the prophet to God (cf. v.9). The illustration of a cup, containing the awful wrath of God and so potent in its effects that those who drink it will be totally overcome by it, is a bold one and is echoed in the Gospels in relation to Christ's substitutionary sufferings (cf., e.g., Mk 10:38).

Such a person is, of course, unable to walk steadily without a guide; but Jerusalem's sons (v.18), sharing her drunkenness, lie prostrate in the streets (v.20). The "double calamities" (v.19) remind us of 40:2. Here the figure of inebriation gives way first to the general ("ruin and destruction") and then to the specific ("famine and sword"); this second pair probably represents the two calamities intended. God thus metes out his judgment through nature and human beings. Oswalt (in loc.), however, comparing this passage with 47:9, thinks childlessness and widowhood are the two calamities, the first at least perhaps implied in v.18.

21 – 23 In v.19 the prophet asks, "Who can console you?" Here the Lord gives the answer.The cup of his wrath, justly placed by him in Israel's hand, is now to be removed in mercy and transferred to her oppressors. The barbaric practice referred to in v.23 is well documented in the ancient Near East, featured especially, but not exclusively, in Assyrian inscriptions.

52:1 – 2 Oswalt (in loc.) aptly remarks that few commentators draw attention

to the fact that this verse has important contacts with 4:2 – 5, speaking as it does of restored Zion's beauty, cleanness, and holiness. The cry "Awake, awake!" (v.1), addressed first to God (51:9) and then to Jerusalem (51:17), comes again as a clarion call to that city, but this time in more exultant tones. Comparison of these verses with ch. 47 makes it clear that they are a development of the theme of transferred punishment seen in 51:21 – 23. Babylon is to be debased, Jerusalem exalted.

What is the "strength" (v.1) Jerusalem is to put on? Baltzer (in loc.) identifies it as a breastplate (he sees this also in 51:9), but the text in no way indicates this. The strength is surely the power of her God (cf. 40:28 – 31; 51:9; but also Jdg 6:12 – 16; Ps 84:5, 7). Her garments typify not only armored might but also probably priestly beauty — fitting, in view of her new God-given holiness — having now a reality formerly lacking (cf. 48:2), and the Jewish reader will know that a married woman's garments were the gifts of her husband and will draw appropriate theological conclusions from this.

The exclusion of "the uncircumcised and defiled" should not be read as the product of harsh nationalism (see comment on 49:23) but as a reminder that the alien so often entered Jerusalem either to conquer or to pollute its worship or both (cf. Ps 79:1; see Kissane, in loc.). Verse 2 especially reminds us of ch. 47; for Zion, instead of Babylon, is now to be enthroned in queenly splendor, a gloriously free city. The book of Revelation also sees Babylon dethroned and destroyed and Jerusalem glorified.

3 – 6 Miscall, 122 – 23, unlike some commentators, finds few examples of later insertions in the text of the book after its main redaction had taken place, but he does regard these verses as alien to the style and content of the context. He claims they may be a later insertion that encapsulates some of the book's main points. Is this view, however, really necessary? The variety of style in this book constitutes one of its main literary qualities, and these verses seem to take their place aptly as a tracing of the historical events that set up the situation in which Jerusalem needs both the exhortations and the promise of vv.1 and 2.

They state briefly three important truths. Jerusalem has been, in fact, handed over to Babylon by God himself — as a punishment, of course. Yet those to whom Jerusalem was given paid nothing and so were owed nothing. So God will

act again, but this time in redemption, not punishment. The word “redeemed” implies cost, so that v.3 presents a virtual contradiction in terms, which is not resolved in v.9 but awaits its resolution in the amazing revelation of redemption’s cost presented in 52:13 – 53:12.

Verses 4 – 5 trace a history of oppression and a sequence of oppressors, with Babylon, it is implied, to be added to Egypt and Assyria. The divine soliloquy in v.5 dramatically presents the question of the appropriate divine action in this new situation faced by his people. All three tyrant nations have scoffed at the God of Israel (cf., e.g., 36:20) with constant blasphemy. The expression “in that day” (v.6) points forward to a period in which God will act decisively for his people in vindication of his name (see Note at 2:11). The prediction will be called to mind when it is fulfilled, thus establishing the true and exclusive deity of the God of Israel (cf. 45:21).

7 – 10 The NASB’s “him who” is to be preferred to the NIV’s “those who,” for the singular accurately translates the Hebrew. Thexton (in loc.) says, “In imagination the prophet sees the runner speeding across the hills to the Holy City, and being greeted joyously by its watchmen, through whom the news of the coming salvation spreads through the whole city.”This exultant passage contains echoes of 40:1 – 11. There Jerusalem was given good news about her God, who would come with power and yet gentleness. Here the prophet brings together a number of important themes, virtually identifying peace, salvation, and the kingdom of God, and so reminding us of the NT’s revelation that Christ’s work secures these and every other blessing for God’s people. How fitting this is just prior to the fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12), in which the sufferings of God’s Servant are described and their significance expounded!

Verse 9 reminds us that Zion here is the ruined city of the future. Faith can claim the promises with joyous songs, rejoicing in God’s comfort and redemption. The reference to God’s holy arm (v.10) takes us back to 51:9, and it is part of God’s answer to his prophet’s prayer (see comment there and on 53:1). This powerful act of salvation will be as public as the deliverance from Egypt. “Here, like the warrior preparing for battle, the Lord has shrugged off his cloak and his powerful arm is *bared* for battle” (Oswalt, in loc.).

11 – 12 The doubled imperatives of this passage now become more urgent.

Yet, urgent as the call is, the departure from Babylon (if that is what is in view; see below) is not to be a pressured flight, unlike that from Egypt (Ex 12:33, 39). Interestingly, Babylon is described not as “here” but as “there” (v.11), thus indicating that the prophet is in Judah and not Babylon (see Introduction, pp. 438 – 48).

Ceremonial purity is important, especially for the priests who transport the holy temple vessels (cf. Ezr 1:5 – 11). It is clear, incidentally, that the purpose of God includes the rebuilding of the temple. The most comforting word of all comes at the end, for God promises that just as at the exodus, he will protect this holy procession from both the front and the rear (cf. Ex 13:21 – 22; 14:19 – 20).

The interpretation in terms of a flight from Babylon is maintained by a large majority of commentators. Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.), however, expresses strong dissent. Pointing out that there has been no reference to Babylon since 48:20, he says (1993, in loc.), “The new need (48:22) and the predicted remedy (49:5 – 6) have been the sole theme.. . . It is unthinkable to return at 52:11 to the historical events of captivity and liberation. To do so makes nonsense of the ordered way Isaiah presents his message.” Accordingly, he sees these verses as “packed with exodus motifs” and the command in its context as “a call to leave the whole setting and ambience of the old life behind.” We might add that the use of exodus motifs at this point provides a most significant OT background to Luke’s reference to the topic of conversation between Christ and Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration: “They spoke about his departure [lit., exodus] which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem” (Lk 9:31) — especially when this follows an important prediction of his sufferings in Luke 9:22.

This alternative interpretation is well argued and must be taken seriously. We recall, however, that biblical typology is not always a matter of simple correspondence between one OT event or institution and its fulfillment in Christ, but that there are typological themes forming a sequence in the OT until ultimately the antitype is revealed in Christ. We might therefore see here a reference to a second physical exodus (i.e., the return from Babylonian exile), which is then put in the shade by the ultimate exodus (to use Luke’s language) — the exodus from the captivity of sin in the work of the Lord’s great Servant (cf. Oswalt, in loc.).

NOTES

3 Whybray (in loc.) writes “The wonderful garden which God had once given to man to inhabit (Gen 2:8 – 9) has become in the OT a symbol of the ideal pastoral or agricultural existence (cf. Gen 13:10; Ezek 31:8 – 9; Joel 2:3). Here, however, and also in Ezekiel 36:35, we have the additional idea of a ‘Paradise Regained,’ the promise of the Return of a Golden Age.”

4 The word לאם (*lᵉʾōm*, ', “nation”) is never elsewhere applied to Israel, considered separately, in the OT. Genesis 25:23 supplies some precedent, however, and the term is certainly appropriate and should be retained rather than following the few Hebrew MSS that have the plural (cf. K&D 2:283).

9 It is unnecessary to assume, with some commentators (e.g., Whybray), that this is a direct reference to the Tiamat myth rather than a symbolic reference to Egypt.Verses 9 – 10 read naturally as dealing with two aspects of the same exodus event (see quotations from Young, on v.10). It could, however, be a more indirect reference, suggesting perhaps that the defeat of Egypt symbolizes Yahweh’s defeat of all evil powers.

10 Young (in loc.), commenting on the word translated “deep” in the NIV, says, “The designation *thôm* [GK 9333] . . . which usually signifies the primeval ocean, need not possess that connotation here. It serves simply to point out that the sea is a great deep of water, a formidable and (to man) impossible obstacle to cross.What to man was a *thôm*, the arm of the Lord made to be dry.”

12 – 16 There are several pronoun changes here, both between singular and plural and masculine and feminine. Motyer (1993, 1999, both in loc.) explains these helpfully.

13 Thexton’s perceptive comment on this verse deserves special mention. Part of it reads thus: “A reminder to God that He is God (verses 9 – 10) may indicate one’s own failure to remember that very thing (verse 13).. . . So the reply of verses 12 – 13 is a quiet affirmation: ‘Yes, I *am* the God you have described. Why will you not really accept the implications of what you yourself have said of Me? If you do, you will know how absurd it is to fear anything mortal man

can do, and you will know that your promised redemption is sure indeed.' "

16 The MT reads literally "to plant the heavens," which, as Skinner and Young suggest, relates the verse to the new heavens and new earth predicted in 65:17; 66:22.The NIV, with many commentators, seems to follow the conjectural emendation לִנְטוֹת (*linṭôt*, "stretching out") instead of לִנְטֹת (*linṭôt*, "planting").The former verb occurs also in v.13, where the NIV translates "stretched out." The NASB's "establish" is vague enough to express either Hebrew verb.

18 The comment above assumes that Babylon's sons could not help her because they shared her drunkenness. "Fainted" (v.20) supports this. Many commentators take it, however, that v.20 pictures them as suffering death at the hands of the Babylonians, with the antelope analogy supporting this. It is possible, of course, that v.20 commences with the inebriation analogy before moving to that of the captured antelope.

19 The NIV follows 1QIsa and the versions. Its note translates the MT as "how can I." The former fits the parallelism better, though the MT is not impossible. See Oswalt (in loc.) for a suggestion based on the possibility of faulty hearing by a copyist.

20 תְּאוֹ (*tᵉʾô*, ', "antelope") occurs only here and in Deuteronomy 14:5.

52:2 The NIV follows the MT here in translating "shake off your dust; rise up, sit enthroned, O Jerusalem," while the NASB has "shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem," based on a conjectural emendation supported by the versions. Whybray (in loc.) is surely correct in saying, "There is no reason to reject the Hebrew. Jerusalem is told first to arise from the dust and then to take her seat on a throne. The word *šᵉbîyâ*, 'captive,' already occurs once in the verse, and a repetition of it is unlikely."

5 Here the NIV properly follows the Qere in translating, "what do I have here?" in place of the difficult Kethiv, "Whom do I have here?" It also follows 1QIsa, Aquila, and the Vulgate in emending the MT's יְהֵילִלוּ (*yᵉhêlîlû*, "wail") to יְהַלְלוּ (*yᵉhallēlû*, ', "wail") to WlLeh/y" (*yehallel*m*û*, "mock, boast"). The emendation that follows the Qere affects also the interpretation of "those who rule them." If they are represented as wailing, they must be the rulers

of Jerusalem at the time Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians, whereas if they mock, they will be the Babylonian rulers. Either appears possible, with the latter perhaps seeming more appropriate, but the former does justice to the MT as it stands. See notes in Watts and Oswalt (in loc.).

7 Thexton (in loc.) remarks, "There is a splendid artistry in its urgent, tumbling phrases, so that by the end of the verse we feel a sense of tremendous expectancy as the herald at last declares his message — '*Thy God reigneth!*' " (emphasis his). It is difficult to take seriously Baltzer's suggestion that "on the mountains" is an indication of musical pitch and that the fast running of the messenger is an indication of musical rhythm. See also the Note on 49:13.

D. The Man of Sorrows and His Vindication (52:13 – 53:12)

OVERVIEW

The interpreter who has meditated on the third Servant Song in ch. 50 and then moves on to this fourth song feels somewhat as a godly high priest must have felt when he moved from the Holy Place into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. In fact, however, the very designation of these passages as a series of "songs" (which they almost certainly were not) is particularly unhelpful at this point. This fourth song is to be seen in its full glory, not only in the light of the NT's interpretation of it, but also in terms of the context in which it comes to us.

We have already commented in the Overview to 51:1 – 52:12 that this earlier passage builds up an atmosphere of excitement, as though to prepare for a revelation of special significance. It should also be noted that the important phrase "the arm of the LORD" in 53:1 is anticipated in 51:9 and 52:10. There is also, as we will note, an important relationship to the chapters that follow it.

The vast majority of commentators hold that the fourth song extends from 52:13 to 53:12, but an important minority group of scholars (e.g., Lind-blom, Orlinsky, Smart, Snaith, Whybray) denies the integrity of 52:13 – 15 with ch. 53. The merit of this minority view is that it emphasizes the links these three verses have with the remainder of ch. 52, thus stressing the importance of the context. Orlinsky, for example, in his "The So-called 'Servant of the Lord' and 'Suffering Servant' in Second Isaiah" (in Orlinsky and Snaith, 21 – 22), writes:

> The entire chapter — actually the theme begins already in ch. 51 preceding — is a proclamation and exhortation to Zion-Jerusalem to prepare for the triumphant return of the exiles, a triumph even greater than the Exodus from Egypt. . .. It is with this dramatic proclamation that our section is to be associated: God's degraded servant, His people Israel, will astonish everyone by the great restoration that he will achieve.

Orlinsky's point is not undermined if we question the communal interpretation he gives the servant, for if we do interpret the servant as an individual here, he

nevertheless expresses and fulfills God's own mind for Israel. What in fact Orlin-sky and others have probably succeeded in doing is establishing the connections of these verses with the earlier part of ch. 52 without really disproving their function as the opening of the fourth song. It is only if we insist on a separation of the songs from their context that the question of oracular unity becomes of major importance.

A great deal has been written on the interpretation of the songs in general and the fourth song in particular. The chief views are still probably best surveyed in North's *Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*. We should, however, add also the line of thought represented, among others, by R. N. Whybray in his book *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet: An Interpretation of Isaiah Chapter 53* (JSOTSup 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1978), and, more briefly, in his work *The Second Isaiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1983), 74 – 78. He holds that the servant passage begins at 53:1, not 52:13, and he identifies the servant as the prophet himself. But his concern is not so much with identification but rather to ask whether he is regarded in the fourth song as a vicarious sufferer and whether it teaches that he dies. He comes to negative conclusions on both matters. Obviously we will need to address both issues.

The view adopted in this commentary is made clear in the Introduction (pp. 453 – 62). Whatever may be said about the earlier songs, we take it that this one is to be understood exclusively in individual terms, fulfilled in Jesus. It is readily granted that the principles of obedience to God's will whatever the cost, in which the cross is taken up by the disciple of Jesus, apply to individual Chris tians and to the church as a whole. The atoning significance of the sufferings and death of the Servant, outlined in this passage, are, however, peculiar to Jesus and to the unique Servant.

Kidner (in loc.) has well outlined the beautiful structure of this passage, which, incidentally, provides one argument for treating it as an entity:

> The poem, unusually symmetrical, is in five paragraphs of three verses each. It begins and ends with the Servant's exaltation (first and fifth stan-zas); set within this is the story of his rejection in sections two and four, which in turn form the centrepiece (vv.4 – 6) where the atoning significance of the suffering is expounded. God and man, reconciled, share the telling (see the "my" and "I" of the outer sections, and the "we" and "our" of 52:1 – 6).

The text of this great passage presents a good many difficulties. In fact North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) declares:

> No passage in the Old Testament, certainly none of comparable importance, presents more problems than this. .. . In the period following Duhm textual emendation was freely resorted to .. . but even before the discovery of the Qumran scrolls textual critics were becoming more cautious and conservative. .. . In a responsible translation like the RSV only two variants from the *textus receptus* are recognized. The prevailing attitude now is that it does not follow that because an LXX reading .. . is more easily intelligible than the MT, it is without more ado to be accepted.

North's words still hold true, as a survey of most commentaries written since then will reveal. Because there are so many problems, it would seem best for us to take the NIV at its face value here and to reserve all textual, translational, and the more thorny interpretive problems for the Notes.

13 See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
14 Just as there were many who were appalled at him —
his appearance was so disfi gured beyond that of any man
and his form marred beyond human likeness —
15 so will he sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.
53:1 Who has believed our message
and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
2 He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.
7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.
9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.
10 Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.
11 After the suffering of his soul,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

COMMENTARY

13 – 15 Once again, as in 42:1, God draws attention to "my servant" and his wisdom (v.13). If we relate v.13 to its earlier context, we note that the reader should not simply rejoice in the wonder of the new exodus. Wisdom consists largely in determining desirable ends and devising practical means to achieve them. The Servant's wisdom is deeply self-denying, for it means accepting ends determined by God and willingly shouldering a burden of untold suffering to make them possible. Here God's wisdom and humankind's decisively part company (cf. 1Co 1:17 – 25).

The threefold assertion of the Servant's exaltation is most emphatic, whether or not we spell it out in terms of resurrection, ascension and session, or second advent. The first two verbs occurring in this combination are distinctive to this prophetic book and come also in 6:1; 33:10; 57:15, each time with reference to God. The predicted exaltation is most reassuring for the reader as he approaches predictions of shame and suffering (v.14). Knight, strongly committed to a communal interpretation of all the Servant Songs, nevertheless says (in loc.), "The Servant here is actually described in terms of divinity. The phrases *shall be exalted* and *lifted up* are representative expressions from earlier literature, such as Isaiah and the Psalms, used normally of God." These are then followed by expressions appropriate only to a human being. Surely we have here a clear anticipation of the incarnation! See also the comment on 53:4 – 5.

The NIV has well presented the striking comparison that occurs in vv.14 – 15, where many observers of the Servant have a double experience of astonishment, the first mingled with horror and the second, at least for those responding in faith, with joy. The theme of suffering and subsequent glory, so common in the NT in application to Christ (e.g., in Acts and 1 Peter), is here presented from the standpoint of the impression made on the onlooker. The strong word translated "appalled"finds its justification in the words that follow, for the sight disclosed is of such exquisite suffering that the Servant's bodily appearance seems hardly human. We need not assume from this that the experience being described is purely physical, for deep inner experiences of anguish demonstrate their presence by their effects on the face and form of the sufferer.

The word "sprinkle" has priestly-sacrificial overtones (see Notes; cf. Ex 29:20 – 21; Lev 16:14 – 15), preparing us for further sacrificial language later in the passage. In common with everything else in these three verses, "sprinkle" relates to the consequences of the Servant's sufferings rather than to the sufferings themselves. It also relates his sacrificial work to the world in general, not simply to Israel. His exaltation gives him complete supremacy over all; and kings will fall silent in his presence, astonished, over-awed, deeply respectful (cf. Job 29:7 – 10), and eager perhaps to see and hear rather than themselves to speak in the presence of such an unprecedented revelation. In Romans 15:21 Paul applies v.15 to the preaching of the gospel in virgin and largely Gentile territory. Note the striking reversal here of the discouraging words of Isaiah's commission (6:9 – 10).

53:1 – 3 The intimate link between v.1 and the closing verse of the last chapter can hardly be missed and poses a difficulty for those who divorce the end of ch. 52 from ch. 53 (see Overview to this passage). The two astonishing events of 52:14 – 15 — the appalling suffering of God's own wise Servant, who deserves none of it, and the subsequent elevation of one so dishonored by people — in fact produce incredulity in many hearing the report of these things. God's way of doing things often does not seem to make sense to human beings (cf. 55:8 – 9; 1Co 1:18 – 31). The cross is, however, where God's power resides; and here is the ultimate answer to the prophet's prayer of 51:9, anticipated by its foreshadowing in the new exodus of 52:10. John 12:37 – 41 joins this verse with Isaiah 6:10 in illustration of the rejection of Jesus by many of the Jews of his day.

Who are the speakers in v.1? Are they Gentiles — or Israelites, possibly speaking through the prophet as their representative? That the first plural can be ambiguous is evident to anybody who has studied this phenomenon in Paul's letters. A good case can be made for both interpretations. On the one hand, readers will naturally assume that Israel is in view, as this whole book is inspired literature addressed to this people. If "we" are Gentiles, we would expect some clear indication of this. On the other hand, the work of the Servant will have wide-ranging application (cf. 42:6; 49:6). In the context it seems natural that the nations and kings (52:15), at first struck dumb by the astounding revelation, then speak in response to it. Oswalt (on 53:4 – 6 in loc.) says, "The indeterminacy of the 'we' is perhaps intentional. . . . All persons who recognize that their sin has caused the Servant to suffer may include themselves in the all-inclusive 'we.' " The "arm of the LORD" is the disclosure of his power, so this revelation answers the prophet's representative prayer in 51:9 (see comment there).

Verse 2 echoes and yet contrasts with 4:2 (see comment there). The whole verse suggests that the Servant will be confronted with adverse conditions from his youth. In fact, Jesus cannot be explained in terms of his human environment, which in his day was dominated by a legalistic Judaism largely devoid of the refreshing moisture of God's word truly understood and applied. Verse 2b implies that his true intrinsic beauty is hidden from people because they look at him entirely from a human standpoint, in which case there are interesting comparisons and contrasts with 1 Samuel 16:6 – 13, where "a shoot from . . . Jesse" (cf. Isa 11:1) is chosen to be king. The principle that human appearance is irrelevant to God's choice is more radically applied here than in the choice of

David. It is possible, however, that these words apply to the Servant, not in terms of his normal appearance but that which is produced by his sufferings (cf. 52:14).

Verse 3 develops the thought of v.2, for the onlookers move from failure to desire him to despising and rejecting him, refusing even to look at him (cf. perhaps Nu 21:8 – 9; Jn 3:14 – 16). The words translated "sorrows" and "suffering" really mean "pains" and "sickness." They occur again in v.4a. What does this imply? Kidner (in loc.) writes that they "might suggest to the reader either a sick man or one sick at heart, as in Jeremiah 15:18. But there is another category, that of the physician's voluntary involvement; for he is also a man of pain and sickness in the sense that he gives himself to these things and their relief. This is the sense defined in Matthew 8:17, quoting Isaiah 53:4." There is another possibility. The concept of punishment finds many analogies in Isaiah's prophecies, from the whipping of the body politic in 1:5 – 6 to the inebriated helplessness in 51:17 – 20. Could not this sickness be another? In this case the punitive nature of the Servant's sufferings is indicated before the vicarious nature of them is made clear in v.4.

4 – 6 This central stanza of the fourth Servant Song has a number of general characteristics. The first is the frequency of the first person plural. This occurs of course several times in vv.1 – 3 as well. Who are the speakers here? Probably the amazed onlookers of the first stanza, who appear from 52:15 to be predominantly, if not exclusively, Gentiles. Then there is in vv.4 and 5 the use of the emphatic pronoun "he," normally reserved in chs. 40 – 55 for God, again strongly suggestive of the incarnation (see comment on 52:13). Note also the frequency of nouns and verbs suggesting both pain and punishment.

The passage also emphasizes the sins of the onlookers, with one of the most vivid analogies — even in this illustration-saturated book — given in v.6. Here is a picture of the willful and yet purposeless waywardness of sin, with probably a suggestion that this is an offense against love as well as holiness, for the divine shepherd is a tender, loving image in the Bible (cf. esp. 40:11). This aimless yet determined wandering is marvelously conveyed in the music of Handel's *Messiah*, with its jerkily wandering melody, and likewise, in total contrast, the deeply moving affirmation of atonement at great cost with which the verse ends.

It is that costly atonement that provides the dominant theme of this stanza. Verse 4a views our punishment figuratively in terms of the visitation of disease (see comments at v.3), while v.4b shows the onlookers coming to the grievously wrong conclusion that the Servant is suffering for his own sins at the hand of God.Verse 5 shows that they have now accepted for themselves the objective fact declared in v.4a. Piercing and crushing are both appropriate terms for the crucifixion, the first literal and the second figurative; and both are aptly summed up as “wounds” later in the verse.

Oswalt (in loc.) points out the significant fact that the metaphors of vv.4 and 5 are precisely those of 1:5 and 6. Peace and healing view sin in terms of the estrangement from God and the marring of the sinner that it causes. Verse 6 may well derive its language from the Day of Atonement ritual (cf. Lev 16:21 – 22); for as God was the author of the ritual (cf. Lev 17:11), the high priest was simply his agent for transferring the sins of the people symbolically to the scapegoat. So there is a divine smiting of the Servant (cf. v.4) but this is for our sins, not his.

Whybray’s view that the Servant does not suffer vicariously for the sins of others is dependent in large part on his identification of the Servant with Deutero-Isaiah. Certainly on the basis of such an identification the idea that he is punished instead of his fellow exiles seems quite ridiculous. Once this identification is challenged, however, much of Whybray’s argument loses its force.

Finally, we should note the element of conversion conveyed in vv.4 – 5. The onlookers put aside their premature judgment on the matter and accept that the sufferings of the Servant are not only penal but also substitutionary. Kidner (in loc.) notes “the expressions, *all we ... we all*, which give the verse an identical beginning and end in the Hebrew; grace wholly answering sin” (emphasis his).

7 – 9 Thexton (in loc.) has given an admirable précis of these verses: “Meekly and without protest the Servant accepts the sentence to death and suffers execution. Although innocent, he is given a felon’s grave.” Motyer’s comments (1993, 1999, in loc.), in which he sets these verses in their wider theological context, are well worth reading. The term “oppressed” (v.7) is appropriate in relation to the trials and death of Jesus; for all those who tried him — Pilate, Herod, Annas, and Caiaphas — had a measure of human authority and misused

it when they condemned him or, washing their hands of him, allowed others to take him to the place of death. In it all, he had a quiet and uncomplaining bearing (cf. esp. 1Pe 2:23), which suggests not only comparison but also contrast with Jeremiah (cf. Jer 11:18 – 20; 12:1 – 3). Writing on v.7b, Simon (in loc.) says:

> This new David (cf. Eze 34:23) gives his life for the sheep who, strangely, are his murderers. He combines both the initiative and the submissiveness of the priest-shepherd and the victim-sheep. Thus he transmutes what might have been merely the murder of a good person into a holy and abiding Messianic sacrifice.

The phrase “by oppression and judgment” (v.8) is, formally, somewhat like the earlier expression “iniquity and the solemn assembly” (1:13, NASB; NIV, “evil assemblies”) in that the two nouns present concomitant aspects of the same fact. The judgment is in fact employed as an instrument of oppression. It seemed as though he must die without issue, which was regarded as a great misfortune or worse in that society.

The phrase “cut off ” strongly suggests not only a violent, premature death but also the just judgment of God (cf., e.g., Ge 9:11; Ex 12:15), not simply the oppressive judgment of human beings. Motyer (1993, in loc.), referring to Whybray’s theory that this chapter does not require the actual death of the Servant, points out that “from the land of the living” is unequivocal in the OT as meaning death (Pss 27:13; 116:9; 142:5 – 6; Isa 38:11; Jer 11:19). The Isaiah 38:11 reference is important for two reasons: the entire context refers to death not only unambiguously but emphatically, and, if the book is conceived as a unity, the reference is part of the wider context of Isaiah 53 (see the discussion in Oswalt, in loc.). H. R. Minn (*The Servant Songs* [Christchurch, N.Z.: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1966], 23) points out that the versions support the MT in reading “my people”; he goes on to say, “If this is allowed to stand — and why should it not? — there is a distinction between the people and the Servant. They are not identical” (see Introduction, pp. 453 – 62).

Verse 9 presents an enigma, a striking prediction fulfilled in due time, and a transition to the final stanza, which describes the Servant’s vindication. The enigma consists in the apparent juxtaposition of “the wicked” and “the rich,” the former more appropriate to his rejection and the latter to his ultimate vindication.We are forced to conclude that the parallelism is not synonymous but antithetical, the first line indicating the human intention and the second the

divinely ordained intervention and transference. This in fact is strikingly fulfilled in the burial of Jesus (Mt 27:57 – 60). Simon (in loc.) writes:

> By a very simple manipulation of the text we may read a less dramatic account according to which he was thrown into a common grave with the wicked and evil-doers. But though this emendation may claim to restore an obvious Hebrew parallelism the simplification seems altogether regrettable here.The ancient commentators wisely retained the word "rich," which has become troublesome only to modern minds. .. . By retaining the unconventional "rich" and rejecting the easier "evil-doers" we follow a sound principle. "Rich" must have been there from the start; it may have become "evil-doers" whereas the reverse is impossible. The paradox should be taken quite seriously.

Motyer (1999), noting that "wicked" is plural while "rich" is singular, makes an important point: "If Isaiah had merely intended the contrast between a shameful and a sumptuous burial he would have used two singulars.The use of a plural and a singular suggests that he is talking not about categories but about actual individuals. He offers no explanation nor is there one until the fulfillment."

The Servant's gentle ingenuousness is asserted at the close of the stanza.

10 – 12 The text of the NIV gives the word "yet" twice in this chapter, the previous occurrence being in v.4. Both verses present reassessment that means the balancing of one partial truth with another, thus giving a full picture. In v.4 penal suffering is balanced — and so interpreted — by substitution; here humanity's unjust treatment of the Servant is balanced — and also interpreted — by God's saving purpose in the Servant's sufferings. Verse 10a is almost shocking in its apparent presentation of arbitrary disregard for personal righteousness, but the reader may recall the substitutionary nature of those sufferings, already declared in vv.4 – 6 and referred to again later in this stanza. At once God is seen not to be harsh but astonishingly gracious.

Verses 10b – 11, as rendered in the NIV, remind us of 52:14 – 15; for after suffering comes vindication, suggesting perhaps at the same time the completion of the Servant's atoning work in his death and the opening of a new life beyond that death. The guilt offering may have special overtones of completeness, for it involved restitution as well as an offering to God (cf. Lev 5). Nothing then remains to be done; the work is complete.

Verse 11a (cf. Notes), with its contrast of “suffering” and “light,” certainly makes us think of the resurrection, which is still more clearly suggested by the earlier words “prolong his days.” In fact, the words “he will see his offspring and prolong his days” seem to stand in intended contrast with the second and third lines of v.8. There is a parallel here with Psalm 22, which has so much in common with this passage, where a sufferer now vindicated declares, “Posterity will serve him” (22:30).

Some commentators take the words “by his knowledge” with the preceding clause; but, asYoung points out, the Masoretic accentuation, representing of course the Jewish traditional understanding, links it with the words that follow it. If this is so, are we to take the pronominal suffix to be subjective, as the NIV does (“by his knowledge”), or objective, as in the NIV’s margin (“by knowledge of him”)? Young (in loc.) well expresses the contextual argument for the latter: “In this context the servant appears, not as a teacher, but as a saviour. Not by his knowledge does he justify men, but by bearing their iniquities.” We are saved not simply by revelation but by redemptive suffering, the latter being the teaching of the context of this verse. In this case, then, it is the experiential knowledge of faith that is in view; and we have here an important background for the Pauline doctrine of justification through the blood of Christ, appropriated by faith.

The adjective “righ teous” and the verb “will justify,” coming from the same Hebrew root (ṣdq), are placed next to each other in the Hebrew, as though to stress their relationship. Calvin stressed that the obedience of Christ is the chief circumstance of his death. His righteous ness and therefore his innocence of sin furnish a basis for his substitution. The final clause of v.11, with its reminder of v.6 (see comments there), states the objective grounds of this justification, which is of course a new position before God, the righteous Judge, on the basis of what the Servant has achieved in his sufferings and not of what we have ourselves done or will do. Strikingly, the emphatic “he” is used again in this clause (see comment on vv.4 – 6). Here, then, is One who is both God and God’s Servant dealing with human sin!

The opening statement of v.12, reminding many commentators of Philippians 2:9, shows how God honors the Servant for his faithful work and the Servant in turn distributes the spoils of battle to others. In fact it introduces a new note into the passage; for 52:13, to which in other ways it answers, contains no military

language. The NT, however, does, and Christ's work there is presented as a victory over spiritual foes, resulting in a distribution of the spoil to those made strong in him (cf., e.g., Eph 4:8; 6:10 – 17).

J. Jeremias (*Servant of God* [W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, eds.; London: SCM, 1957], 97), L. S. Thornton (*The Dominion of Christ* [Westminster: Darce, 1952], 91 – 95), and others have argued that the words *heauton ekenos*m*en* ("made himself noth-ing") in Philippians 2:7 are a translation from a Semitic original meaning "he poured himself out" and are based on this verse.Thornton further points out that the clause can in fact be completed by the words "to death" from v.8. Here, in both passages, is the ultimate in self-abnegation in dedication to the will of God.

The last three clauses of v.12 sum up the matter. The Servant was numbered with the transgressors not only in the outward circumstances of his death (Mk 15:27 [NIV mg.]), but also as a general description of the meaning of his sufferings (Lk 22:37). Innocent, he was charged with human sins and so bears their penalty. Beyond this, as the letter to the Hebrews proclaims, he now has an intercessory ministry based on the finality of his sufferings. This means that even when vindicated by God, he is still concerned to minister to his people.

In 44:28 the name "Cyrus" is solemnly and dramatically revealed long before his coming. Our present passage speaks so eloquently of the work of Christ that even the inclusion of his name could add but little more to the extent of its disclosure of him.

NOTES

13 יַשְׂכִּיל (*yaśkîl*, "will act wisely") can also mean "will have success, will prosper" (NIV mg.). This latter sense is less common, but it would give this line a sense parallel with the one that follows it. Thus, either rendering can be well supported.

14 עָלֶיךָ (*ʿāleykā*, m "at you" [NIV mg.) is usually amended to עָלָיו (*ʿālāyw*, "at him"), with the Syriac and Targum. Lindblom, North, and others argue for

retention as the harder reading and as consistent with oscillation between second and third persons found elsewhere in Hebrew poetry. The NASB, however, adds "*My people*" in italics (to indicate that it is an addition to the text to clarify its meaning), but it is difficult to justify this. It seems much more natural to see vv.14 and 15 as making a contrast between the humiliation and exaltation of the servant.

There could be a line missing after line 1, completing the sense-rhythm; but in the absence of textual evidence this is purely conjectural.Young (see his discussion in loc.) construes vv.14 – 15 differently, so that there is still a protasis-apodasis construction, but a different one. The unusual nature of the poetic structure here may be intentional, to compel attention to the exceptionally important theme.

15 יַזֶּה (*yazzeh*) is often denied the sense of "sprinkle" (cf. NIV) on syntactical grounds, though E. J. Young (*Studies in Isaiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 199 – 206) and Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) argue persuasively for it and for a priestly-sacrificial meaning. C. R. North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) — following H. S. Nyberg ("Smartonas man: En studie till Jes. 52:13 – 53:12," *SEA*U 7 [1942]: 47) — argues that it does have this meaning. North, however, interprets it in terms of a decontamination ritual, perhaps for a leper (cf. n. at 53:3), translating, "so shall many nations guard against contagion by him," interpreting the shutting of the mouth in line with this. This seems unlikely in the light of v.15b, which suggests a positive revelation and therefore a contrast with the horror of v.14, not a further exposition of it.

Most commentaries now in fact take the verb to be from a Hebrew root cognate with the Arabic *naza* m, ("to leap)," with the sense "to cause to leap in amazement." North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) argues against this, and it is true that this particular use of the Arabic verb cannot be documented; but the LXX seems to support it, while other Greek versions do not. Contextually, the sense "startle" seems slightly more apt because it gives a better contrast with "appalled" (v.14) and a better parallel with "shut their mouths"; but Motyer is correct in arguing that the case against "sprinkle" is not all that strong.

53:2 The theory — usually associated with OT scholars of the Scandinavian school, such as Nyberg ("Smartonas man," 5 – 82) and I. Engnell, "The Ebed

Yahweh Songs and the Suffering Messiah in 'Deutero-Isaiah,'" *BJRL* 31 (1948): 54 – 93 — that the language here shows the influence of the mythology and cult of Tammuz (the dying and rising vegetation god) is rejected by most scholars as being largely conjectural and as having insufficient objective basis. See especially E. R. Yamauchi, "Tammuz and the Bible," *JBL* (1965): 283 – 90. Baltzer points out that "shoot" and "root" associate this passage with the "messianic" (the quotation marks around this word are his) prophecy in 11:1 – 9.

3 – 4 Some modern scholars suggest that the Servant is presented here as a leper. Certainly נָגוּעַ (*nāgûaʿ*, , "stricken") is used in connection with leprosy in 2 Kings 15:5, but this does not constitute full proof; nor does the use of נֶגַע (*negaʿ*, "skin disease," from the same root) in Leviticus 13:2 – 3 et al., because 2 Kings 15:5 uses a different noun. There is, however, support from rabbinic sources. In such picturesque writings as Isaiah's, it is possible that the prophet metaphorically identified the Servant as a leper to picture his social isolation and substitutionary sin-bearing.

5 Most commentators — even those who deny the presence of penal substitution elsewhere in the OT — agree that it is the meaning of this passage, though some argue against this (see, e.g., Whybray, in loc.).

8 מֵעֹצֶר וּמִמִּשְׁפָּט לֻקָּח (*mēʿōṣer ûmimmišpāṭ luqqāḥ*) is translated "by oppression and judgment he was taken away"; but all three main Hebrew words are uncertain in meaning, and the particle מִן (*min*), with which the first two words begin, has a wide range of meanings. The NIV text is interpreted in the comments above.The words could also mean, "after arrest and judgment he was taken away," or "by oppression and without judgment he was taken away"; there are other possibilities. The general sense is clear, for the Servant is the victim of a grave miscarriage of justice. See the major commentaries and D. J. A. Clines, *I, He,We and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1976), 17 – 19.

The next clause is also difficult. The NIV takes דּוֹרוֹ (*dôrô*; GK 1887) as "descendants" (cf. Nu 9:10). Driver ("Isaiah 40 – 66: Linguistic and Textual Problems," *JTS* 36 [1935]: 403) has suggested connections with Akkadian and Arabic roots with the sense "plight." So, as Whybray (in loc.) says, the clause could mean, "but who gave a thought to his plight?" Either rendering suits the

context. So also does the NIV margin's, which takes *dôrô* in another sense and treats three-quarters of the verse — instead of its second clause only — as a question.

10 The text of the NIV expresses the intention of the second person singular (cf. mg.). Such oscillation between second and third persons is common in prophecy.

11 The KJV's "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied" follows the MT. The NIV, apart from the bracketed words inserted to complete the sense, follows the LXX and 1QIsaa and is now generally assumed to be correct.

12 Motyer (1993 in loc.) remarks on the great sense of anticlimax the reader has when reading the first two clauses here and has made out a case for an alternative translation. If, however, we interpret the second clause as a reference to those made strong in him (as suggested in our comment), we may perhaps see the first as deliberate understatement for effect.

E. God's Glorious Future for Jerusalem (54:1 – 17)

OVERVIEW

Herbert (in loc.) writes: "The change of mood between Isa 53 and 54 is abrupt. Yet . . . it is appropriate. The Servant's task is seen to be fulfilled. Nothing can be added to that. But . . . the incredible triumph of Isa 53:10 – 12 issues into the hymn of praise in 54:1 – 10, welcoming the dawn of the New Age." Miscall (in loc.) also links the two chapters, though in a different way, for he notes that the first is about an unnamed man and the second an unnamed woman. This is true, although the reader of the NT can name the one, while 54:11 surely makes it clear (contra Miscall) that the other is Zion/Jerusalem.

1 "Sing, O barren woman,
    you who never bore a child;
burst into song, shout for joy,
    you who were never in labor;
because more are the children of the desolate woman
    than of her who has a husband,"
    says the LORD.
2 "Enlarge the place of your tent,
    stretch your tent curtains wide,
    do not hold back;
lengthen your cords,
    strengthen your stakes.
3 For you will spread out to the right and to the left;
    your descendants will dispossess nations
    and settle in their desolate cities.
4 "Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame.
    Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated.
You will forget the shame of your youth
    and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood.
5 For your Maker is your husband —
    the LORD Almighty is his name —
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
    he is called the God of all the earth.
6 The LORD will call you back
    as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit —
a wife who married young,

only to be rejected," says your God.

7 "For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with deep compassion I will bring you back.

8 In a surge of anger
I hid my face from you for a moment,
but with everlasting kindness
I will have compassion on you,"
says the LORD your Redeemer.

9 "To me this is like the days of Noah,
when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth.
So now I have sworn not to be angry with you,
never to rebuke you again.

10 Though the mountains be shaken
and the hills be removed,
yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken
nor my covenant of peace be removed,"
says the LORD, who has compassion on you.

11 "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted,
I will build you with stones of turquoise,
your foundations with sapphires.

12 I will make your battlements of rubies,
your gates of sparkling jewels,
and all your walls of precious stones.

13 All your sons will be taught by the LORD,
and great will be your children's peace.

14 In righteousness you will be established:
Tyranny will be far from you;
you will have nothing to fear.
Terror will be far removed;
it will not come near you.

15 If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing;
whoever attacks you will surrender to you.

16 "See, it is I who created the blacksmith
who fans the coals into flame
and forges a weapon fit for its work.
And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc;
17 no weapon forged against you will prevail,
and you will refute every tongue that accuses you.
This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD,
and this is their vindication from me,"
declares the LORD.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 The only appropriate response to a great work of God is joyous praise, which is exactly what we find here, neither for the first time (cf., e.g., 12:5; 26:1; 35:10; 42:10 – 12) nor for the last (cf. 61:10 – 11).

This passage is anticipated in 49:14 – 23 and also in 50:1 – 3, that is, in the bulk of the material that stands between the second and third Servant Songs. Now the theme is taken up finally and definitively when the Servant's work has been fully accomplished. This certainly suggests that his sufferings and triumph have provided the basis for the reconciliation of Israel and the mission to the Gentiles that are joyously proclaimed here.

In the OT culture childlessness was a deeply shameful state (v.1; cf., e.g., 1Sa 1). As the prophet has already indicated in 50:1, there has been no divorce between God and his people. After the temporary separation of the exile, Israel will bear more children than in earlier days. This reminds us of the promises of God to the patriarchs (e.g., in Ge 28:14). Paul applies this promise to the Jerusalem that is above (Gal 4:27) and so to the church, and we must remember that 53:10 says of the Servant, "he shall see his offspring." For the wider issues of interpretation this raises, the Introduction (pp. 450 – 53) should be consulted.

A figure is taken from nomadic life (v.2), suggesting that the promises to Abraham and his nomadic family (e.g., Ge 12:1 – 3; 28:13 – 14) are in the prophet's mind. The family tent must be enlarged and in consequence will need to be strengthened. The probable allusion to Genesis 28 finds confirmation when, as Whybray (in loc.) notes, we find the verb translated "spread out" (v.3) used there also (Ge 28:14). He mentions also that the phrase "dispossess the nations" (*yar*m*aš haggôyim*) occurs elsewhere in the OT only in Deuteronomy and always in reference to the conquest of Canaan by Israel. This suggests, therefore, that the primary reference is to the gradual expansion of the little postexilic community in Judea; however, it is possible to interpret it more broadly.

4 – 8 The figure of the restored wife continues to dominate the passage. People often fear disgrace as much as or even more than physical danger (v.4). "The shame of your youth" is either Egyptian bondage (cf. Hos 11:1) or, less likely, affliction under the Assyrians; and "your widowhood" is of course the exile.

In v.5 the prophet encourages his readers to think of the One who is the husband of his people. No fewer than six titles and descriptions are brought together here, all building up a picture of a God of immense power and overflowing grace. He is both able and willing to restore them to himself and to their land. The husband analogy occurs also in Jeremiah 31:31 – 34, in the context of the new covenant promised there.

In v.6, the NASB ("For the LORD has called you, like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit") is much to be preferred, for, as Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) notes, the NIV makes the husband seem the blameworthy one. The Hebrew by no means requires this, and the wider theological context both in Isaiah and in the Bible as a whole cries out against it. If Israel was "forsaken" for a while in the exile, it was her own fault, though of course even the forsaking was by no means absolute, as otherwise there would have been no Ezekiel and no Daniel.

"For a brief moment" (v.7) contemplates the exile — which must have seemed long to the people themselves — as a mere episode in contrast to God's everlasting kindness that will embrace them (v.8). The phrase "a surge of anger" translates two Hebrew words dominated by the short "e" sound, and "kindness," too, is so dominated (there are other elements of aural similarity as well), thus perhaps further suggesting for the hearer the incredible substitution of the latter for the former.

9 – 10 The writer to the Hebrews lays special stress on the great assurance that God's oath gives us (Heb 6:13 – 20; 7:20 – 28). Illustrating his theme from both history and nature, the prophet compares God's oath to the great postdiluvial promise of Genesis 8:22, which itself related to the natural environment of humankind and so suggested the reference to the mountains. Even the visible universe, dominated for the Judeans by the hills of their native land, will prove less enduring than God's love, guaranteed by his word (cf. Mk 13:31). A relationship between persons is given added strength by its formalizing in covenantal terms.The beautiful Hebrew word *h.esed* (the love that is unswervingly loyal to a covenant; GK 2876) is here rendered "unfailing love."

11 – 15 Baltzer (in loc.) thinks that the prophet here gives Jerusalem, represented as a woman, three names: "Wretched One," "Storm-tossed," and

“Not-comforted,” and this is certainly possible.The expression “covenant of peace” (cf. Eze 34:25 – 31) in v.10 is expounded here (see esp. v.13). It deals with the dispeace of 48:22 (see also the comments on 57:19 – 21). Westermann (in loc.) comments, “A change has come over God. He ceases from wrath and again shows mercy. There is a clear re-echoing of the words of the prologue (40:1 – 3).” Such a change, wrought through the Servant’s sacrifice and of course on God’s own initiative, is expressed in the NT’s concept of propitiation (Ro 3:25; Heb 2:17; 1 Jn 2:2, all NASB).

God’s covenant with his people implies that he will protect them, as a husband does his wife. In fact, the marriage analogy is still present; and it has been suggested by Eaton, 85, that “the adornment of Zion with jewels and eye-cosmetic . . . may relate to her preparation as a royal bride of Yahweh.” Certainly Revelation 21:10 – 27 (based on this passage) presents the new Jerusalem in the context of 21:2, which reads, “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

This covenant of peace has important links with the new-covenant passage in Jeremiah 31:31 – 34, for in it the people — not only collectively but distributively — will know God through his personal instruction. Thus v.13 can be quoted and applied to Christ and his disciples (cf. Jn 6:45).The swift movement of thought from stones to children may reflect a pun found also in the NT, as Simon (in loc.) suggests:“Like John the Baptist in the Gospels he puns on the assonance in Hebrew of stones and children (*avanim/banim*, cf. Matt 3:9).”

The city that has for so long known iniquity and the judgment through enemies that God visited on her (vv.14 – 15) will then be true to its name, Jerusalem, a place of peace, resulting from its new righ teousness. There is no reference to the Messiah, but the juxtaposition of righteous ness and peace reminds us of 9:7; 11:1 – 9. All this will, of course, be under God’s new regime, not foreign or domestic tyranny. Yet perfect and effectively protected as the city is, there will still be evil intent on its destruction, suggesting the Satan-inspired antagonism faced by the church, the city of God, in the NT (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 53).

16 – 17 These verses both amplify and contrast with v.15. There God

promises that he will not send attackers against his people (contrast this with 10:5 – 12), while here he declares that destructive nations are created by him. The point here, of course, is that this means they are in his absolute power and so are employed or restrained under his sovereign hand. Not only physical assault but also moral accusation will be repulsed, for Israel's righteous ness (v.14) is from him. The people then enter their heritage (Dt 4:21).

The term "servants" (plural) is of such frequent occurrence in so-called Trito-Isaiah (chs. 56 – 66) that its use here has the effect of linking parts of the book ascribed by many scholars to two different authors (see Introduction, pp. 438 – 48). "Servant" in the singular occurs twenty times in chs. 41 – 53; but in chs. 54 – 66 — since the supreme Servant and his unique act of divine service has been revealed, and he has made the singular use of the word forever his own — it never occurs.

NOTES

8 שְׁצָף (*šeṣep*, "surge") is a *hapax legomenon*. North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.) mentions the suggestion of some that it is connected with *šas*m.*ap* ("to cut, to slash"), so indicating a momentary fit of anger. He himself prefers the suggestion, implied in the RSV, that it should be emended to *šet.ep* ("flood"), thus providing a bridge to v.9. It is preferable to retain the MT if, as here, it makes sense.

11 – 12 פּוּךְ (*pûk*,', "turquoise") appears also in 2 Kings 9:30; Jeremiah 4:30, where it is an eye cosmetic; but in 1 Chron icles 29:2 it is apparently a setting for stones, which seems more likely here. The various stones referred to in these verses cannot be identified with certainty.

F. The Universality, Generosity, Urgency, and Effectiveness of God's Gracious Word (55:1 – 13)

OVERVIEW

In introducing this passage, Kidner (in loc.) says, "This call to the needy is unsurpassed for warmth of welcome even in the N.T. The chapter builds up twice to a climax, first in verses 1 – 5, then, over a still greater range, in verses 6 – 13."

For those commentators who hold that Deutero-Isaiah wrote chs. 40 – 55, this chapter is the climax of his work; they point, for example, to the emphasis on the divine word that also comes at the beginning of his prophecies (cf. 40:1 – 11). This chapter could figure as a climax, and there are plenty of links of word and idea between it and ch. 40, as Baltzer makes clear. But this chapter would just as well fit the start and finish of a section as the opening and closing of a complete book. The book of Revelation could easily conclude with the great climax at the end of ch. 11, but in fact it is only halfway through at this point. The realistic recognition of sin and continued rebellion that characterizes some of the later chapters of Isaiah, and the prediction of a new heaven and earth (65:17; 66:22), which goes even further than the vision of this chapter, make us realize that God has still more to say through his prophet to his people.

1 "Come, all you who are thirsty,
    come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
    come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
    without money and without cost.
2 Why spend money on what is not bread,
    and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
    and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
3 Give ear and come to me;
    hear me, that your soul may live.
I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
    my faithful love promised to David.

4 See, I have made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander of the peoples.
5 Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations that do not know you will hasten to you,
because of the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.”
6 Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.
7 Let the wicked forsake his way
and the evil man his thoughts.
Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.
8 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.
9 “As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.
10 As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
12 You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.
13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree,
and instead of briers the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the LORD’s renown,
for an everlasting sign,
which will not be destroyed.”

COMMENTARY

1 – 5 Many commentators hear the voice of the Near Eastern water vendor in

vv.1 – 2, while others discern the accents of personified wisdom (Pr 9:1 – 6). Either is appropriate, for Isaiah is a master of illustrations from nature and contemporary culture. Moreover, as Whedbee has shown, at least for the chapters acknowledged to be by Isaiah of Jerusalem, he has definite contact with the Israelite wisdom tradition.We may, in fact, discern overtones of both. The water carrier is also a wise counselor.

Young (in loc.) has pointed out that the introductory word *hôy*, which lies behind the first instance of the English "Come" in v.1 ("ho" in the KJV), "is mainly an attention-getting device, but it expresses a slight tone of pity." Young goes on to say, "The prophet is an evangelist with a concern for the souls of men and a realization of their desperate condition without the blessings that the servant has obtained."

The water vendor is, of course, part of the normal commercial scene in the Near East; but God through the prophet offers the people in Babylon not only water but also more costly drinks and also invites them to a banquet (Lk 14:15 – 24). Verse 2, with its mildly chiding tone, probably alludes to the people's preoccupation with settling down in Babylon. As Thexton (in loc.) puts it: "They had been in Babylon for many years — some for the whole of their life.They had grown roots, acquired property and commercial interests, were prosperous and secure. The prophet does not plead or argue, but throws into the quiet pool of their complacency a disturbing pebble, as he asks: 'Does all this really satisfy you? Is this what you are for?'" He speaks with urgency, "Listen, listen to me" (v.2; see Overview of 51:1 – 52:12).

A substantial group of modern scholars (e.g., Eissfeldt, Westermann, Whybray) consider that in vv.3 – 5 God promises his people that he will take the Davidic covenant (1Sa 7:8 – 16) away from the royal line and give it to the people as a whole, thus perhaps putting it on a par with the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. But Eaton, 87 – 88, points out: "If the author had intended to make a fundamental change in the Davidic doctrine . . . he would surely have needed to be more explicit. . . . The nation is to be blessed within the radius of the Davidic covenant, but the destiny of the royal house remains. . . . It would be a poor sort of eternity that the covenant would have, if its heart were taken out!"

The faithfulness of God to the Davidic covenant is extolled in much of Psalm

89. It is true that the author expresses puzzlement at the ills befalling David's house in his day (see esp. Ps 89:49), but this very passage in Isaiah, interpreted in terms of Jesus of Nazareth, is God's answer to his concern, for this passage, which constitutes an important link with the promises of a Davidic Messiah given earlier in the book, is quoted by Paul in Acts 13:34 with reference to the resurrection of Christ, through whose risen kingship the promises of this passage receive their eternal and therefore their final fulfillment.

During David's reign, Israel's kingdom reached its greatest extent. David, as a faithful worshiper of the Lord, was therefore a witness to God's truth to all the people in his empire, as well as being their leader. He therefore anticipated in himself the prophetic and kingly functions of the Messiah. In God's future for his people, as here depicted, the empire will be wider still (cf. 9:7). The far parts of the earth will come up to Zion (cf. 2:1 – 5; 60:1 – 14) because she will attract them by the beauty her God has given to her (cf. 54:11 – 12). This means then that while ch. 54 depicts blessing for Zion, ch. 55 sees this blessing as going far beyond it and so reminds us of the universal mission of Christ, which took his messengers out from Jerusalem to a needy world.

6 – 7 The call of vv.1 – 3 is echoed here, but with a stronger moral emphasis. Earlier the folly of self-willed waywardness was stressed, while here it is its wickedness. Verse 6 implies both a promise and a warning. There is urgency in this call, for the time is not unlimited (cf. 61:2). Both in his lifestyle and the attitudes that lie behind it, the sinner is wrong, so repentance must touch the inner man as well as the outward deeds (cf. Mt 5:21 – 22, 27 – 28). The call here is not simply uttered to the people as a group, as in ch. 54, but to the individual ("wicked" and "evil man" are singular). The promise of God's pardon is assured (cf. 1:16 – 20; 44:22; et al.).

8 – 13 Verses 8 – 9 do not refer simply to the inscrutable character of God's ways and thoughts, for in the light of v.7, there is clearly a stress on the moral difference. God's thoughts and ways are in fact governed by righteousness — his righteous ness — so his effective word accomplishes a moral purpose: the reclamation of the sinner from the error and wickedness of his ways. The reference to "the heavens" and "the earth" (v.9) is characteristic of Isaiah, and he goes on to make a second reference to "heaven" in v.10. The God who is so different from his sinning human creatures is nevertheless so benevolent even to them that he constantly supplies them with food by his gift of rain and snow

from heaven.

Verse 10 shows an awareness of the ceaseless round of nature but also the purpose of it, which was hidden, at least for a time, from the Preacher in Ecclesiastes 1:8 – 11. The whole food-producing process is encapsulated within v.10, the only important factor excluded being the actual sowing of the seed. This latter is featured in the parable of the sower (Mk 4:1 – 20), which has some features in common with this passage (cf. also Heb 6:7 – 8). The passage teaches the efficacious nature of God's word and of the grace that works through it (v.11). Here, as in Henry Drummond's book title (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897), we may discern "Natural Law in the Spiritual World"; for the world of nature, designed by God, often furnishes illustrations of spiritual truth.

Verse 12 begins with the Hebrew word *kî* ("for," omitted in NIV), introducing the consequences of the pardon God offers and, as Oswalt (in loc.) says, allowing vv.12 – 13 to function both as the conclusion of vv.6 – 13 and of chs. 40 – 55. With God's conditions of repentance having been fulfilled and the people's return to the Lord having made possible a return to the land (see comment on 7:3), the prophet can speak of their joyous and peaceful journey (v.12). He moves from the literal joy and peace to the metaphorical mountains and hills and then back again to the literal, for v.13 probably refers to the regeneration of the land, though this in turn may symbolize spiritual fruitfulness. All this will serve to bring glory to God, pointing beyond itself to his eternal grace and power.

NOTE

13 The נַעֲצוּץ (*naʿᵃṣûṣ*, "thornbush") occurs only here and in 7:19. For בְּרוֹשׁ (*bᵉrôš*, "pine trees"), see the Note on 41:19. סִרְפָּד, "briers") is a *hapax legomenon*, rendered "nettle" by North (*Isaiah 40 – 55*, in loc.), who correctly notes, "some such mean and noxious weed is required by the parallel 'camel-thorn' and the contrasting 'myrtle.' "

IX. God as Judge and Savior (56:1 – 66:24)

OVERVIEW

Just as chs. 40 – 55 are widely denied to Isaiah and ascribed to an unknown exilic author, generally designated "Deutero-Isaiah," so chs. 56 – 66 are often denied to both and viewed as the work either of a single author (Trito-Isaiah, prophesying after the return from exile), or of a group of postex-ilic prophets. Others, however, see the chapters as part of Deutero-Isaiah's work, while those who maintain the traditional conservative view treat the entire book as the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem (see Introduction, pp. 439 – 45).

Whatever one's view on the question of authorship, there can be little doubt that there is a change in geographical perspective. The people addressed in chs. 40 – 55 are being encouraged to return from the Babylonian captivity, whereas in chs. 56 – 66 they are in the land of Canaan. On the assumption that these chapters are the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem (as we have argued in the Introduction), do they deal with conditions of his own day, or are they, like chs. 40 – 55, addressed to the situation of a later time, in this case the postexilic period? A case can be made for either.

The book of Judges shows the people of Israel experiencing many wonderful divine deliverances, yet with their spiritual and moral defects quickly reemerging, so that they are no better at its end than they were at its beginning. History shows us that sin may adapt itself to different conditions and take different forms but that its essential nature of rebellion against God, expressed among other ways in social sins, does not change. The land of Israel, as contemplated in these chapters, is "a place of corruption (56:9 – 59:15a) and devastation (63:7 – 64:12)" (Kidner, in loc.). In general terms, this can apply both to preexilic and postexilic Judah.

We must ask the question: Why were these oracles placed here, after chs. 40 – 55, rather than before them? Perhaps because, although delivered to the society of Isaiah's own day and reflecting the conditions of that day, they will also be appropriate for the postexilic community and its spiritual and moral needs, and because they contain some prophecies that will particularly challenge and encourage that community. This general interpretation is not without its

difficulties; nevertheless, it seems to fit the facts best. The main difficulties will be faced in the exposition to follow.

What is the theological function of these eleven chapters in the book as a whole? Oswalt, 453, has expressed this very well:

> Chapters 56 – 66 are a synthesis of what seem to be conflicting points of view in chapters 7 – 39 and 40 – 55. Chapters 7 – 39 call people to live righteous lives in obedience to the covenant, with the threat of destruction if they fail. Chapters 40 – 55 seem to speak of grace that is available to the chosen people and depends on nothing but receiving it. These two ideas seem irreconcilable. This final division of the book shows that this is not the case. It is as people, any people, choose to live the life of God as he graciously empowers them that they come to know the true meaning of being the servants of God.

A. Salvation Extended to the Disadvantaged (56:1 – 8)

OVERVIEW

One sees here that the major sections into which I have divided this book, although logically based, may not have been hard and fast divisions in the mind of the person who put it all together; for, despite the fact that 56:1 appears to begin a new major section, it has important links with what preceded it. Even after the assurance of great blessing for Israel in ch. 54 and the universal invitation of ch. 55, some foreigners and even some Israelites (“eunuchs”) may wonder whether they are included. The prophet deals with their qualms here.

1 This is what the LORD says:
“Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.
2 Blessed is the man who does this,
the man who holds it fast,
who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it,
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”
3 Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the LORD say, “
The LORD will surely exclude me from his people.”
And let not any eunuch complain,
“I am only a dry tree.”
4 For this is what the LORD says:
“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant —
5 to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will not be cut off.
6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD
to serve him,
to love the name of the LORD,
and to worship him,
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant —7
these I will bring to my holy mountain

and give them joy in my house of prayer.
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house will be called
a house of prayer for all nations."
8 The Sovereign LORD declares —
he who gathers the exiles of Israel:
"I will gather still others to them
besides those already gathered."

COMMENTARY

1 – 2 Motyer (1993, in loc.) pointing out that the two closing clauses of v.1 recapitulate 51:5, affirms that within the editorial unity of the Isaianic literature we are intended to read from ch. 55 to ch. 56 without a break. Many scholars point to the verbal links with 46:13 here, yet also to the difference in atmosphere of the two verses. In the earlier passage God chastised his people for their unrighteous unbelief and failure to accept his word promising them an imminent salvation. Here, however, it is their general lifestyle and their failure to keep his law (cf. v.1 with 51:4), symbolized by the Sabbath, that are under attack.

Young (in loc.), pointing out that righ teous-ness by works is not being taught here, goes on to say, "Smart also maintains that this verse moves in the direction of the later Judaism, in which God's coming salvation is made to depend upon the nation's keeping of the law. That, however, is not what the verse teaches. Men are to do righ teous-ness, not in order that God's salvation may come, but because it is already near." Compare this with the call for repentance of both John the Baptist and Jesus himself in view of the imminence of the kingdom of God (Mt 3:1 – 2; 4:17; cf. Isa 40:3). Incidentally, could anything be more characteristic of Isaiah than the call for justice in v.1 (cf. 1:17; 11:4; 33:5; and also 61:8)?

The benediction formula, characteristic of but not peculiar to the genre of wisdom literature (cf. Pss 1:1; 119:1; Pr 8:32, 34; but also Isa 30:18; 32:20), names the Sabbath-keeper as a truly happy person. There is no need to assign this passage to a postex-ilic writer, for the Sabbath was an ancient divine institution, and Isaiah himself refers to it in 1:13. In that earlier passage, as we argued there, it is the abuse of religious institutions that is under attack, not those

institutions themselves.

The NIV, which preserves the poetic variation of “man” to “son of man” in successive lines in 51:12, has opted for a more prosaic translation in v.2 in rendering both simply as “man.” Is the ideal here presented a negative one? Only if the Sabbath itself is viewed in terms simply of the prohibition of work and not positively, in terms of opportunities of worship and of spiritual, mental, and physical renewal. The negative that brings v.2 to its close is balanced by the positive exhortations in v.1: “Maintain justice and do what is right.”

Westermann (in loc.) writes: “During the exile the Sabbath had become a badge denoting membership of the community that worshipped Yahweh.” So, from now on, “whether one holds to Yahweh or not is a matter for the individual to decide for himself, and the most conspicuous sign of decision is observance of the Sabbath.” Whether or not his first sentence is correct (and it is a frequently made conjecture without clear evidence to support it), the second was certainly to be true of Gentiles of the Dispersion who came into contact with Jews and their faith.

3 – 8 The worship system of Israel, centered in the temple and always important, was to be underlined by the work of Haggai and Zechariah, who lent all of their prophetic authority to supporting the rebuilding enterprise in Jerusalem. Of necessity, Ezra and Nehemiah also emphasized the particular-ism of the Jewish faith in the interests of religious purity. Inevitably some who lived in the land felt excluded; and, of course, passages such as Deuteronomy 23:1 – 8 banned eunuchs and some foreigners from participation in the worship system. The prophet has a word of comfort for them, showing that the blessing pronounced in v.2 did not contain built-in racial or physical limitations.

Paul Hanson (*The Dawn of Apocalyptic* [Philadel-phia: Fortress, 1975]) considers that the “authors” of Trito-Isaiah were against the supporters of Ezra and Nehemiah. But, as Sweeney, 53, asserts, this argument overlooks the fact that the passage here says nothing about intermarriage and that “the EzraNehemiah traditions do not exclude the eunuch or the foreigner who adopts the covenant of Judaism. They speak only about the prohibition against intermarriage as means to avoid pollutions and abominations of the gentiles and thereby to protect the covenant (Ezr 9).” It is worth recalling that there is even a

particularism within the marvelous internationalism of the Chris tian faith, for Christians worship as God a particular Man who was born and ministered and died and rose again within his own Jewish society. Balanced biblical faith, in every historical period, had a divinely given blend of particularism and universalism.

Verse 3 speaks of the foreigner and the eunuch. The prophet engages with the sense of insecurity that must often have plagued those whom the OT calls "resident aliens" committed to Israel's God (e.g., in Nu 15:13 – 16), later called "proselytes." If even Israelites could still have guilty consciences despite the offering of sacrifices (cf. Heb 9:9), how much more such foreigners! The eunuch would have felt even more insecure, for his very place in the ongoing life of God's people was simply an episode. The family held great importance in the religio-cultural emotions of Israel. A dry tree bears no fruit; a eunuch begets no children.

For each group God has an authoritative word of consolation through the prophet.This word need not be viewed as a cancellation of Deuteronomy 23 but rather, in the light of v.1b and of the future tenses of vv.5 – 8, as eschatological and so belonging to the new order of the future. In this way there is a "practical translation of the missionary vision of chs. 40 – 55 into modest terms, in the concern shown for the *eunuch* and the *foreigner*, outsiders in the midst of Israel" (Kidner, in loc., emphasis his). Faithfulness to the Lord — expressed in keeping the Sabbath law (v.4), because it pleases him and therefore is surely done out of love for him (cf. v.6) — will give the eunuch a secure place in God's temple. (It should be noted that the Sabbath is treated in Ex 31:12 – 17 as a sign of the covenant, as it appears to be also here.)

We can hardly imagine that the prophet is speaking literally when he refers to a memorial in the temple (v.5). There may even be a suggestion of eternal life in the closing affirmation of v.5. The six marks of the godly foreigner (v.6) provide a beautiful description of true godliness, with love as its great dynamic, the very antithesis of Pharisaic legalism.

In one of Isaiah's greatest visions (2:1 – 4), the people of the nations come up to Jerusalem to worship in the house of the Lord. There it is their eagerness that is highlighted, while here it is the divine initiative. The very one whose purpose

involves gathering his own scattered people will also include the foreigners in the great pilgrimage to Jerusalem.The court of the Gentiles was a kind of symbol and earnest of this, and it was from this that Christ expelled the sharp-practicing traders, saying, “Is it not written: ‘My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mk 11:17; cf. Jn 2:16). These Gentiles will not come simply on sufferance or as mere observers but as full participants, offering sacrifices alongside the Jews. (For discussion of the interpretation of this, see the Introduction, pp. 448 – 50.)

NOTE

5 The MT reads, “I will give him an everlasting name.” The NIV follows 1QIsaa here in using the plural.

B. God's Message to the Wicked (56:9 – 57:21)

OVERVIEW

Some modern scholars, accepting in general terms a threefold analysis of the book (see Introduction, pp. 439 – 45), nevertheless regard this passage as preexilic, though not necessarily as Isaianic. The sins in view here kept on recurring in Israel's history, so that the question of date cannot be easily settled by reference to the content of the passage. If we accept the unity of the book, the matter becomes a question of the readers chiefly intended to profit by the oracle. If they are postexilic, this would reveal the continued presence of pagan syncretism, though, of course, it may be that this was chiefly to be found among those who had never been in Babylon.

9 Come, all you beasts of the field,
come and devour, all you beasts of the forest!
10 Israel's watchmen are blind,
they all lack knowledge;
they are all mute dogs,
they cannot bark;
they lie around and dream,
they love to sleep.
11 They are dogs with mighty appetites;
they never have enough.
They are shepherds who lack understanding;
they all turn to their own way,
each seeks his own gain.
12 "Come," each one cries,"let me get wine!
Let us drink our fill of beer!
And tomorrow will be like today,
or even far better."
57:1 The righteous perish,
and no one ponders it in his heart;
devout men are taken away,
and no one understands
that the righteous are taken away
to be spared from evil.
2 Those who walk uprightly
enter into peace;

they find rest as they lie in death.

3 “But you — come here, you sons of a sorceress,
you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes!

4 Whom are you mocking?
At whom do you sneer
and stick out your tongue?
Are you not a brood of rebels,
the offspring of liars?

5 You burn with lust among the oaks
and under every spreading tree;
you sacrifice your children in the ravines
and under the overhanging crags.

6 The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion;
they, they are your lot.
Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings
and offered grain offerings.
In the light of these things, should I relent?
7 You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill;
there you went up to offer your sacrifices.

8 Behind your doors and your doorposts
you have put your pagan symbols.
Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed,
you climbed into it and opened it wide;
you made a pact with those whose beds you love,
and you looked on their nakedness.

9 You went to Molech with olive oil
and increased your perfumes.
You sent your ambassadors far away;
you descended to the grave itself!

10 You were wearied by all your ways,
but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless.’
You found renewal of your strength,
and so you did not faint.

11 “Whom have you so dreaded and feared
that you have been false to me,
and have neither remembered me
nor pondered this in your hearts?
Is it not because I have long been silent
that you do not fear me?

12 I will expose your righteous ness and your works,
and they will not benefit you.

13 When you cry out for help,
let your collection of idols save you!
The wind will carry all of them off,
a mere breath will blow them away.
But the man who makes me his refuge

will inherit the land
and possess my holy mountain.2”
14 And it will be said:
“Build up, build up, prepare the road!
Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.”
15 For this is what the high and lofty One says —
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
“I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite.
16 I will not accuse forever,
nor will I always be angry,
for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me —
the breath of man that I have created.
17 I was enraged by his sinful greed;
I punished him, and hid my face in anger,
yet he kept on in his willful ways.
18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him;
I will guide him and restore comfort to him,
19 creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel.
Peace, peace, to those far and near,”
says the LORD. “And I will heal them.”
20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea,
which cannot rest,
whose waves cast up mire and mud.
21 “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

COMMENTARY

9 – 12 These verses remind us of earlier verses in Isaiah (see 5:11 – 12, 22) and later ones in Ezekiel and Zechariah (Eze 3:16 – 21; 34:1 – 6; Zec 9:16 – 11:17; 13:7 – 9). The people are viewed, implicitly, as the flock of God. The prophet, as God’s mouthpiece, likens the enemies of Israel to wild beasts lurking in field and forest and ironically calls them to feast on the sheep (v.9).

The watchmen — who almost certainly include false prophets and also perhaps other leaders of the people — belong to a different picture, that of a city in danger; but they are soon translated into the dominant scene as dogs, set to watch the sheep (v.10). To picture them as watchmen who are blind and guard dogs that are mute is a form of satirical lampooning — well deserved. Blindness,

muteness, indolence, and self-seeking greed describe different aspects of their culpable ineffectiveness. When the analogy moves from the dogs to the shepherds (v.11), the same characteristics can be seen. Verse 12 graphically represents the drunkard's careless abandon (cf. 22:13) and inebriated optimism.

57:1 – 2 Thexton (in loc.) comments:

> It is one thing to see righ teous men perishing and to doubt in consequence either the justice or the power of God. With this problem the biblical writers are frequently concerned, and most notably in the book of Job. But when the suffering or downfall of good men causes no heart-searching, raises no problems, demands no explanation, it means that though religious observance may survive, faith in God has given place to a practical atheism. .. . It is from this basic atheism that there spring all the other evils and abuses of which the prophet speaks.

Verse 1 has an unexpected twist to its thought at the end, suggesting the rewarding of the righteous after death and leading into v.2. A man lying dead may seem to a distant observer to be resting. He is, indeed, if he is righteous.

3 – 10 It almost seems in vv.3 – 13 that the people are on trial and are charged, found guilty, and sentenced, though this judicial setting is less obvious than in 1:2 – 20. The words of vv.3 – 4b are intentionally insulting, not to the parents but to the children. This was a conventional way of indicating undesirable qualities (cf. 1Sa 20:30). Sorcery (cf. 2:6) and adultery in combination point to pagan fertility rites. Those who practiced them apparently did so blatantly and with many a mocking gesture against the true prophet of God sent to chastise them in his name (v.4; cf. 30:9 – 11).

The pagan rites of Canaan, featuring sacred trees (v.5; cf. 1:29 – 30), pandered to the sexual appetites of the worshipers. During the reign of Ahaz (cf. 2Ki 16:3 – 4) and — if Isaiah experienced it — of Manasseh (2Ki 21:2 – 9), the prophet must have been deeply grieved by the pagan child sacrifices practiced in the land. The references to ravines, crags, and stones are obscure but no doubt reflect aspects of paganism.

At v.6 the verbs change from plural to feminine singular, so that the people are pictured collectively as an adulterer or a prostitute. The place where adultery was committed was "a high and lofty hill" (v.7; cf. Jer 2:20), referring to the pagan high places. The analogy could refer either to the temple or to domestic

houses, but there may be an implied comparison with the prostitute's sign of her trade. The sensitive Israelite reader will, of course, remember that it is the word of God — and, most aptly, the assertion that there is only one God — that must be inscribed on the doors (v.8; cf. Dt 6:4 – 9).

Molech (v.9), god of the Ammonites, is associated with child sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 2Ki 23:10) in the OT (see Notes). The olive oil and perfumes could be offerings, or else they belong to the picture of the prostitute. The apostate people do not pursue their paganism as a kind of leisure activity but go to great lengths (v.10). They have courted the gods of nations far away and also indulged in necromancy. Weariness has not, however, induced them to give up. Verse 10 may represent an ironic comparison with 40:27 – 31 and even perhaps a suggestion that there is a wicked, supernatural source this strength is derived from.

11 – 13 Isaiah is fond of rhetorical questions, and those of v.11 are followed by irony in v.12 and by mocking challenge in v.13a. The section closes with a message of comfort for the man of faith. The people have forgotten who their God is (v.11; cf. v.15), for otherwise how can they fear the petty deities of the pagans more than their great and holy God? As Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) argues cogently, this is best located in the preex-ilic period. The references to righteous ness and works are ironic, of course. Verse 13 reminds us of the prophet's onslaught on idolatry in chs. 40 – 48, and it should be compared also in its language with 40:6 – 8, 24. The best exposition of the closing promises is Psalm 37.

14 – 21 The note of comfort for the faithful, expressed in v.13b, prepares us for these verses. The urgent imperatives of v.14, so characteristic of certain passages in this prophecy (esp. 51:9 – 52:12), echo 40:3, the second allusion to that chapter in this passage (cf. comment at vv.11 – 13). The great call for repentance in 55:6 – 7 finds expression in this picture of spiritual roadbuilding requiring the removal of obstacles.

The wearied but unrepentant sinner somehow finds renewal of his strength to continue in sin (v.10); but here those "crushed and bowed down"— as Thexton (in loc.) literally renders the words translated "contrite" and "lowly" (v.15) — are revived in the presence of the exalted, living, and holy God (cf. ch. 6).The

urgent call to bustling activity in v.14 contrasts strikingly with the eternal calm of v.15, and we are reminded of the sublime statement of Ephesians 1:3, made to Chris tians deeply involved in the work-a-day world. The Lord is not here pictured in detached unconcern for the world — as Epicurean philosophy depicted the gods on Mount Olympus — but as active in reviving the spirits of his dispirited people.

In vv.16 – 18 we seem to encounter once again allusions to ch. 40, as a glance at 40:1 – 2, 27 discloses. There is also an echo of Genesis 6:3. These verses reveal the righteous anger and the amazing grace of God and also the awful persistence of humanity's rebellion against him. The unmerited nature of God's favor has rarely been expressed more beautifully than in v.18. The passage does not suggest that there is to be grace for the determinedly impenitent, for the "mourners" of v.19 are probably identical with the dispirited of v.16, properly chastened and restored to God but hardly daring to hope for comfort from him (cf. Mt 5:4). Isaiah's language here may reflect that of Hosea, his older contemporary in the northern kingdom (Hos 6:1 – 2; 11:3; 14:2, 4).

Once more the prophet employs a reiterated word — "Peace, peace"— to make a point. Possibly, as some commentators suggest, he uses the familiar conventional word of greeting to emphasize that there is a welcome home for the wayward.The "far" and the "near" here may simply be home-dwelling and dispersed Israelites respectively (cf. 11:11 – 12; 43:5 – 7; 56:8), or it may also include the foreigners. Certainly its language can appropriately include these, as the quotation in Ephesians 2:17 shows.

This passage ends with the same warning to the recalcitrant as the prophet gave in 48:22 but with the addition of a telling illustration. In a book so well structured as this, it may mark the end of a particular section of prophecies (see Introduction, pp. 459 – 62), just as 48:22 does. But it may also simply be a warning that the decisive offering for sin of 52:13 – 53:12 and the welcoming words of chs. 54 – 55 do not mean that the call to repentance, made generally in 55:1 – 5 and with some specific applications in chs. 56 – 57, need not be taken seriously.

NOTES

56:10 The word “Israel” is not in the text but is obviously needed. In fact, it may well look back to v.8, showing, as Young (in loc.) points out, that no new beginning is made here.

57:5 Whybray (in loc.) points out the unusual spelling of אֵלִים (*ʾēlîm*, “oaks”) and suggests that in fact it may refer to “the Els,” i.e., the Canaanite gods. The prophet is no doubt using a play on words because of the association of sacred trees with Canaanite polytheism.

6 חֵלֶק (*ḥēleq*, “smooth”) is an attributive without an expressed noun, “stones” being conjectural. For other suggested translations, see W. H. Irwin, “‘The Smooth Stones of the Wady’? Isaiah 57, 6,” *CBQ* 21 (1967): 31 – 40. See also Oswalt (in loc.).

8 This verse has been the subject of many conjectural emendations, the more important of which are gathered together in Whybray (in loc.). The NIV makes good sense without emendation, but with free translation at some points.

9 The NIV repoints מֶלֶךְ (*melek*, “king”) as *mol*m*ek* (i.e., “Molech”).The MT, followed by the NASB (and NIV mg.), is not impossible, as it would line up the thought with the reference to ambassadors later in the verse.

17 See also the reference to greed in 56:11, suggesting oracular unity.

19 There are difficulties of syntax here.Young (in loc.) suggests that the “fruit of the lips” (lit. Heb.; NIV, “praise on the lips”) is in fact the message of peace to those who are far and near.The introductory formula “says the LORD” then probably introduces the promise of healing.

C. The True Fast (58:1 – 14)

Overview

Although this oracle may have been particularly relevant to the postexilic community, there are a number of features that remind us of the eighth-century prophets. There is the emphasis on social righ teous ness and also particular phrases, as a comparison of v.1 with Hosea 8:1 and Micah 3:8 reveals. An eighth- or early seventh-century provenance is, therefore, perfectly feasible. It also has links with Zechariah 7, where the prophet underlines the harmony of his teaching with that of the earlier prophets, presumably including Isaiah. Its teaching also has links with the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5 – 7).

1 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
3 ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please
and exploit all your workers.
4 Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
5 Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter —
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own fl esh and blood?
8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righ teousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.
11 The LORD will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
12 Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins
and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.
13 “If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the LORD’s holy day honorable,
and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
14 then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”
The mouth of the LORD has spoken.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3a The prophet has already exposed the empty ritualism of the people in ch. 1. Here he concentrates on one religious activity — fasting. A trumpet call

(v.1) is intended to rouse the hearers to action, but it must be clear and unambiguous (cf. 1Co 14:8). There is no mistaking the message here in what Knight (in loc.) calls “a timeless sermon.”The people show outward evidence of wanting to do God’s will, probably by consulting priests and prophets (v.2). They are also prepared to show their earnestness by enduring the minor inconvenience of fasting (v.3a). What does a little abstinence matter if they can retain their basic lifestyle of disobedient rebellion against the moral demands of their God? Such empty externalism reappears in every age and culture, and it is significant that the prophet’s earlier condemnation of it in ch. 1 comes hot on the heels of his indictment of their rebellion in vv.2 – 5 of that chapter.

3b – 5 Through his prophet God exposes the people’s hypocrisy. Clearly their fasting is not spiritually motivated. Apparently they make the fast easier by idleness and make up for lost time by getting their laborers to work all the harder. Fasting undertaken as a duty can produce an edgy, irritable community, especially in difficult climatic conditions, and v.4a probably reflects this. Prayers offered with this kind of background will never reach the heavens (v.4b). The humbling to which v.5 refers (cf. also v.3) seems to be a synonym for fasting. “Sackcloth and ashes” also suggest the extravagant expression of humiliation.

6 – 9a The questions of vv.6 – 7, following immediately on those of v.5, serve to point up the people’s separation of religious observance and social righteous ness, a theme the eighth-century prophets never tired of expounding. There is oppression (cf. Jer 34:8 – 22) and poverty in the land. The prophet even has to appeal to the claims of blood relationship, such a pitch has insular selfishness reached.

Young (in loc.) recalls the references to light in the promises of 9:2 (cf. 60:1 – 3) thus: “In these first two clauses [of v.8] the emphasis falls upon speed. Elsewhere Isaiah uses the verb *break forth* of the hatching of eggs (59:5) and of water gushing forth (35:6). The word seems to suggest suddenness, swiftness, and novelty. In the Near East the light of day follows almost immediately upon the darkness of night” (emphasis his). God also pledges restoration of health, protection, and access to himself in prayer.Verse 8b recalls 52:12. “Light” perhaps encapsulates all this, for in these chapters it suggests fullness of divine blessing (cf. 59:9; 60:1).

9b – 12 Isaiah develops the same basic theme again but with some variations. Oppression is emphasized by repetition, and there is also a reference to character assassination. Verse 10 suggests that social concern is not just to be seen in an isolated episode, but it is to be a way of life for God's people.We are to spend not just our money but also ourselves (cf. 2Co 12:15).

The promise of v.8 is taken still further in v.10b. The glorious dawn will issue in an even more glorious midday. In this light life that is fully provided for and strong — always refreshed (cf. Jer 31:12) and ever refreshing others — can flourish under God's blessing (v.11). Verse 12 is an apt promise for those who have experienced the physical devastation described in 1:7 – 9 and will particularly encourage those returning from exile, so that no clear dating for the verse can be gathered from its contents.

13 – 14 Herbert (in loc.) suggests that the association of "Sabbath" with denying oneself in Leviticus 16:31 [NIV mg. says "must fast") may account for the inclusion of these verses in this chapter. There is no need, however, for us to detach them from the rest of it. Moreover, as Ralph Alexander has pointed out (in a personal communication), the Sabbath here may represent the entire Mosaic covenant and the blessings to be enjoyed in following it (see comment on 56:3 – 8). Kidner's fine comment (in loc.) is worth quoting fully:

> Lest it should seem that philanthropy is all, these verses describe the strictness and the gladness of the sabbath-keeping God desires. If fasting is to be an opportunity to show love to our neighbour, the sabbath should express first of all our love of God (though both the foregoing passage and the sabbath practice of Jesus insist that it must overflow to man). It will mean self-forgetfulness (v.13a) and the self-discipline of rising above the trivial (v.13b). But to people of this spirit God can safely give great things (v.14).

D. Sin, Sorrow, and Salvation (59:1 – 21)

OVERVIEW

The prophet who could speak words of great comfort and encouragement could also confront his hearers with their sins and make them face unpleasant spiritual and moral facts. In ch. 57 he condemned adulterous paganism and in ch. 58 hypocritical fasting; here it is chiefly injustice that calls forth his condemnation. Each of these chapters speaks about prayer. In ch. 57 it was not answered because it was not addressed to the true God (57:13); in ch. 58 it was because the petitioners were hypocrites (58:4); here, in 59:1 – 2, it is because of their sins and particularly, as later verses indicate, their injustice.

This passage, like much else in chs. 56 – 66, is often ascribed to "Trito-Isaiah" (see Introduction, pp. 439 – 45); despite this, many modern commentators see plenty of links with earlier parts of Isaiah. For example, Herbert (in loc.) likens it to chs. 24 – 27, "in which prophetic word and community response are interwoven."

1 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.
2 But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.
3 For your hands are stained with blood,
your fingers with guilt.
Your lips have spoken lies,
and your tongue mutters wicked things.
4 No one calls for justice;
no one pleads his case with integrity.
They rely on empty arguments and speak lies;
they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.
5 They hatch the eggs of vipers
and spin a spider's web.
Whoever eats their eggs will die,
and when one is broken, an adder is hatched.

6 Their cobwebs are useless for clothing;
they cannot cover themselves with what they make.
Their deeds are evil deeds,
and acts of violence are in their hands.
7 Their feet rush into sin;
they are swift to shed innocent blood.
Their thoughts are evil thoughts;
ruin and destruction mark their ways.
8 The way of peace they do not know;
there is no justice in their paths.
They have turned them into crooked roads;
no one who walks in them will know peace.
9 So justice is far from us,
and righteousness does not reach us.
We look for light, but all is darkness;
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.
10 Like the blind we grope along the wall,
feeling our way like men without eyes.
At midday we stumble as if it were twilight;
among the strong, we are like the dead.
11 We all growl like bears;
we moan mournfully like doves.
We look for justice, but find none;
for deliverance, but it is far away.
12 For our offenses are many in your sight,
and our sins testify against us.
Our offenses are ever with us,
and we acknowledge our iniquities:
13 rebellion and treachery against the LORD,
turning our backs on our God,
fomenting oppression and revolt,
uttering lies our hearts have conceived.
14 So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.
15 Truth is nowhere to be found,
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.
The LORD looked and was displeased
that there was no justice.
16 He saw that there was no one,
he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm worked salvation for him,
and his own righteousness sustained him.
17 He put on righteousness as his breastplate,
and the helmet of salvation on his head;

he put on the garments of vengeance
and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.
18 According to what they have done,
so will he repay
wrath to his enemies
and retribution to his foes;
he will repay the islands their due.
19 From the west, men will fear the name of the LORD,
and from the rising of the sun, they will revere his glory.
For he will come like a pent-up flood
that the breath of the LORD drives along.
20 "The Redeemer will come to Zion,
to those in Jacob who repent of their sins,"
declares the LORD.
21 "As for me, this is my covenant with them," says the LORD."My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever," says the LORD.

COMMENTARY

1 – 8 The vivid anthropomorphisms of vv.1 – 2 ("arm . .. ear . .. face"), following on from the reference to "the mouth of the LORD" in 58:14, remind us of ch. 40. Here, however, they come in a very different context, stressing condemnation rather than comfort. God is addressing people who have anticipated some kind of divine intervention and have prayed for it (equally applicable to the time of Assyria's threat against Jerusalem and the situation of the exiles in Babylon), but whose lifestyle reveals all too clearly that their desire and prayer are not directed toward the establishment of God's rule on earth; for they are themselves rebels against that rule.

The people are particularly guilty of social injustice. In words reminiscent of 1:15, the prophet moves from the worst effects of legal oppression — viz., unjust condemnation to death (v.3) — to the false witness that produces such a verdict (v.4), and ultimately to the state of deep social and moral apathy that is the root cause of such a situation. He then employs two figures taken from the basic human needs of food and clothing (vv.5 – 6). The metaphors imply that what these evil people produce seems at first wholesome and constructive, only to be revealed for what it really is. In fact, the illustration of the gossamer that is useless for clothing implies that evil is ultimately counterproductive, not only for its victims but also for its perpetrators. Sin is self-destructive.

The prophet does not indicate that he is condemning any particular class among the people, though perhaps he has chiefly in mind those who are the administrators of justice (cf. 5:22 – 23). Because Isaiah's words are not only strong but also general, Paul could quote vv.7 – 8 in his general indictment of human sin in Romans 3:15 – 17. Several commentators have pointed out that the image of the moral life as a walk — so common in Scripture — dominates vv.7 – 8. "The way of peace" finds its definition at the end of v.8, thus making it clear that the prophet is speaking not about the results of their conduct for others but for themselves (cf. 57:20 – 21).

9 – 11 Here there is a sudden change from the third person to the first; and the people, accused and condemned in the earlier verses, now begin to face their own sins, or at least the consequences of them. The justice and righteousness the prophet speaks of here (v.9) are God's, manifested in behalf of his people.The contrast with 58:10 – 11 should be noted (cf. also 8:19 – 22). Such darkness is declared — in Deuteronomy 28:15, 29 — to be caused by disobedience to God. Oswalt (in loc.) correctly sees v.10 as of critical importance in Isaiah because of its use of the word "blind." There has been much in the book about the blindness of the people (e.g., 6:9 – 10; 8:16 – 17; 42:7). He says, "Now Isaiah is finally enabled to speak Israel's admission of her condition, an admission that prepares the way for the glorious proclamations of chs. 60 – 62." For the sorrowful sounds of v.11, see 38:14.

12 – 15a Motyer (1999, in loc.) writes on these verses: "Isaiah, master of drama, has used blindness (10), bears and doves (11) illustratively. Finally, he presents a court scene, with sin as the prosecutor and the Lord . . . as judge."

A new and much deeper note is now sounded. Hatred of the consequences of sin and its destructive effects on one's own life are not necessarily evidence of true repentance. It is when we face sin as rebellion against the holy God, who loves us, that we begin to see it in some degree as he sees it. The prophet may be identifying with the people, expressing himself what he knew should be their own penitence. His thought uses much of the available Hebrew vocabulary for sin (vv.12 – 13; cf. 1:2 – 4). From recognition that all has been committed in God's sight, he moves to confess that all was against him. In v.9 the people recognize that divine justice, the saving justice in which God delivers his

oppressed people, is far away, while here they acknowledge that social justice is excluded from their society (v.14), along with truth (v.15) — again probably largely truth of witness (cf. vv.3 – 4 and comment). The situation is so serious that the good person is at risk in such a society.

15b – 18 Paul's quotation of vv.7 – 8 in Romans 3:15 – 17 is in a context (Ro 1:18 – 3:20) that presents sin against the background of God's wrath against it. Here that wrath manifests itself. The intervention probably applies to those who are willing to take the part of the oppressed. The "salvation" referred to is God's saving activity in behalf of those unjustly treated (v.17; cf. 49:24 – 26). He goes to war against sin, and this passage becomes a model for Paul's description of the Chris tian armor employed by God's people in their struggle against the devil, the master of the realm of sin (Eph 6:10 – 17). For the zeal of the Lord, compare 9:7; 37:32. In the final line of v.18, it becomes clear that the enemies with whom God will do battle are in Gentile lands as well as in Israel.

19 – 21 The chapter that began with a picture of a nation so utterly depraved by its sin moves now to a glorious climax in the grace of God. Verse 19 has been variously translated and interpreted (see Notes). As rendered in the NIV, it means that God's acts of judgment will cause people all over the world to revere him, the second part of the verse presenting a further statement of the overflowing wrath of God against his foes. Coming in judgment to the world, he will, however, come in a different character to Zion, but only when she repents. Knight (in loc.) draws attention to the "careful use of words" in v.20, for "Jacob" calls to mind the ancestor with the twisted nature. His descendants, like him, are in need of repentance. Paul aptly uses v.20 in support of his hope of Jewish repentance in Romans 11:25 – 27, where the word modification is accounted for by the LXX.

Many commentators (e.g., Westermann, in loc.) sever v.21 from what went before it, largely because the conventional phrase "declares the LORD" reads like the close of an oracle. Does it really matter whether these verses belong together in the same oracle? Surely not! The book has clearly been put together with theological considerations in mind, and v.21 fits well here if it shows the blessed consequences of the people's repentance in v.20. The NT shows that God has given two covenantal gifts to his church — the Word made flesh in Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 4:4 – 7). These two gifts are here pledged (vv.20 – 21) — at least in their anticipatory forms — as eternal gifts.

"My words . . . in your mouth" may suggest personal reading (cf. Jos 1:8), for completely silent reading is a product of a more sophisticated society; it could also suggest that the word given and appropriated is now to be proclaimed. Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) argues that the references here to "you," "your mouth," and "your children" (in each case second person singular) are references to an anointed one, who is identical with the Servant of Yahweh, with the references to God's words being connected with that one's prophetic ministry.

NOTES

5 – 6 צִפְעֹנִי (*sip^ʿônî,*' "vipers") cannot be identified with certainty (see also 11:8). Oswalt (in loc.), who shows the complexity of the thought in these verses, declares that they can hardly be surpassed "for their picture of the menace and the futility of the society that is ruled by sin," and comments on the objection of some scholars to what they think are failures of logic here: "commentators can always write better poetry than poets can."

19 The NIV's margin — "When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD will put him to flight" — supplies a subject for the first clause and interprets רוּחַ יְהוָה (*rûaḥ yhwh*) as the "Spirit of the LORD," which of course is its most frequent OT sense. The NASB does the first, but not the second.There is a helpful discussion of this verse in Young (in loc.) and also in Oswalt (in loc.), who argues for a different translation, though at the same time acknowledging the possibility of the view taken here.

E. The Future Glory of Zion (60:1 – 22)

OVERVIEW

Miscall, 136, calls chs. 60 – 62 a crescendo, the high point and climax of the book's vision of restored Jerusalem in which all the major Isaianic positive terms, themes, and images are woven together. Chapter 60 depicts the future glory of Zion, which is identified in v.14 and is anticipated by 59:19 – 21. Most commentators take the chapter to be a unity, except for v.12, the status of which will be discussed in the Notes.

In 2:1 – 5 Jerusalem is distinguished by its elevation. There it is the center from which the divine message goes out to all the world, so people of other nations come up to worship at the temple. In 42:6; 49:6 – 7, the Servant of the Lord has a ministry to the nations, who in 52:14 – 15 are astonished by both his sufferings and his subsequent exaltation.

It is only when our present chapter is treated in isolation from these earlier passages, especially from 52:13 – 53:12, and assigned to a different author (see Introduction, pp. 439 – 45) that it can be said that it sets forth "resurrection without death, triumph without travail, conquest without a cross" (Thexton, in loc.). Such criticisms are not made of chs. 54 – 55 (though they could easily have been made) simply because of their generally acknowledged literary unity with ch. 53. But, on the assumption of the book's unity of authorship, ch. 60 rests as much on the sufferings of that chapter as they do.

If it can be said that the NT teaches not only substitutionary atonement through the sufferings of Christ but also the church's identification with him in suffering for the will of God, and that the latter element is not represented here, then we must say that there is a place for presenting the glorification by God of his people as a pure gift, since this underlines his unmerited favor. It is the glory of the Lord that makes this vision what it is, for Zion's glory is seen to be simply the reflection of his. For the general interpretation of the chapter, see the Introduction, pp. 448 – 58.

1 “Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the arm.
5 Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
6 Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.
7 All Kedar’s flocks will be gathered to you,
the rams of Nebaioth will serve you;
they will be accepted as offerings on my altar,
and I will adorn my glorious temple.
8 “Who are these that fly along like clouds,
like doves to their nests?
9 Surely the islands look to me;
in the lead are the ships of Tarshish,
bringing your sons from afar,
with their silver and gold,
to the honor of the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.
10 “Foreigners will rebuild your walls,
and their kings will serve you.
Though in anger I struck you,
in favor I will show you compassion.
11 Your gates will always stand open,
they will never be shut, day or night,
so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations —
their kings led in triumphal procession.
12 For the nation or kingdom that will not serve you will perish;
it will be utterly ruined.

13 “The glory of Lebanon will come to you,
the pine, the fir and the cypress together,
to adorn the place of my sanctuary;
and I will glorify the place of my feet.
14 The sons of your oppressors will come bowing before you;
all who despise you will bow down at your feet
and will call you the City of the LORD,
Zion of the Holy One of Israel.
15 “Although you have been forsaken and hated,
with no one traveling through,
I will make you the everlasting pride
and the joy of all generations.
16 You will drink the milk of nations
and be nursed at royal breasts.
Then you will know that I, the LORD, am your Savior,
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.
17 Instead of bronze I will bring you gold,
and silver in place of iron.
Instead of wood I will bring you bronze,
and iron in place of stones.
I will make peace your governor
and righteousness your ruler.
18 No longer will violence be heard in your land,
nor ruin or destruction within your borders,
but you will call your walls Salvation
and your gates Praise.
19 The sun will no more be your light by day,
nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you,
for the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.
20 Your sun will never set again,
and your moon will wane no more;
the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your days of sorrow will end.
21 Then will all your people be righteous
and they will possess the land forever.
They are the shoot I have planted,
the work of my hands,
for the display of my splendor.
22 The least of you will become a thousand,
the smallest a mighty nation.
I am the LORD;
in its time I will do this swiftly.”

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 In 52:1 – 2 God calls Zion to awake and sit on her throne. This passage goes further by calling her to shine with the divine glory (v.1). Impenetrable darkness covers the whole earth (v.2), and it once enveloped Israel since she was not walking in the light with her God (cf. 8:19 – 22; 59:9 – 10). The wonderful spotlight now shining on Zion's hill is really the divine glory that is situated above Jerusalem, whereas in the wilderness journeys it preceded and followed God's people (see Ex 14:19 – 20; Isa 52:12; 58:8, but esp. 4:5 – 6). His glory, so situated, will act like the sun, not only giving light but also causing the city itself to radiate it (cf. v.5).

This light of God will have great power of attraction. The combination of "nations" and "kings" (v.3) reminds us of 52:15; and this, along with the use of ch. 60 in Revelation 21 and the linking of the glory of God and the Lamb in Revelation 21:22, prompts us to think of the divine glory here as that of the risen Christ-Servant-Lamb.

4 – 9 God told Abraham to lift up his eyes and look at Canaan, which he and his seed were to possess (Ge 13:14 – 17). Here Zion is told to look and see her dispersed children coming from other lands (v.4). She glows with the radiance of God's glory and with the joy of a fulfilled hope (v.5).There are also streams of pilgrims from the far parts — wealthy, seafaring peoples such as the Phoenicians and merchants from the deserts of Arabia. They all come with appropriate gifts, with the gold, incense, and lambs all finding their place in the decoration and worship of the temple (vv.6 – 7; cf. Mt 2:1, 11). As Kidner (in loc.) points out, the sacrificial terms of v.7 preclude a purely literal interpretation (esp. in the light of passages such as Jn 4:21 – 26; Heb 10:1; 13:10 – 16).This passage, unfulfilled before the coming of Christ, can hardly teach literal sacrifice when his sacrifice fulfilled the entire OT system of offerings (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 52).

The questions of v.8, with their vivid imagery, are echoed by the Chris tian reader. Psalm 87 predicts that foreigners will be registered among the citizens of Zion. Isaiah 19:23 – 25 places Egypt and Assyria alongside Israel as God's people. Do the sons of Zion here include foreigners, or are they simply the dispersed of Israel returning on Gentile ships (v.9)? Probably we should opt for the latter interpretation, though the former is not impossible in the context.

10 – 12 Throughout much of her history, Jerusalem was subject to assault from foreign enemies. It was foreigners, the Babylonians, who destroyed her walls; and other foreigners, the Romans, would do so again. Like other ancient Near Eastern cities, Jerusalem's gates were shut every night as a protection against sudden attack. All this reflected the judgment of her God that was so often on her. Now she will be the object of his grace (cf. 40:1 – 11). Jerusalem will receive both the ser vice and the wealth of the nations and their monarchs, and no opposition to her will be tolerated by her God (vv.11 – 12). Any fulfillment of this section after the exile was only partial. For example, the Persians made possible the rebuilding of the walls but did not do it themselves (v.10). Its true fulfillment lies beyond the OT era.

13 – 14 Although this goes beyond anything realized in history, it will take up into itself elements from the past. Just as Lebanon supplied wood for Solomon's temple (1Ki 5), so will it do so again (v.13; cf. Eze 40 – 42). The nations that came against Jerusalem in such a scornful spirit (see esp. chs. 36 – 37) will now do obeisance to her as the city of her God (v.14). The term "Holy One of Israel" is found in each of the three main parts into which Isaiah is often divided and serves as an important link running through the book (see Introduction, p. 446).

15 – 22 The exultant tone of this chapter is sustained to its end. The city so oppressed by some (v.14) has been avoided by others (v.15). Perhaps her smaller, near neighbors are in view. Now foreigners and their monarchs will love and cherish her, delighting to supply her needs. This happens because the Lord will be revealing himself to her in all the glory of his grace, as indicated by the catena of titles used in v.16, each of which has covenantal implications. "The Mighty One of Jacob," of course, is also a reminder of the sinfulness and guile of Israel's ancestor, so underlining God's unmerited favor.

In v.17 the merely adequate is replaced by the valuable. Its reference is probably more general than that of vv.6 – 7, where the materials are all related specifically to the needs of the temple. Once again "peace" and "righteous ness," those heavenly twins, are found together (cf. 54:13 – 14). The beautifully poetic description leads in v.18 to statements about the absence of violence and then to further abstractions, symbolizing God's action on Zion's behalf and her own reaction to this. There may be an implicit reference to the meaning of the name

“Judah,” which is “Praise.”

Verses 19 – 20 supply important background for Revelation 21 – 22. Genesis 1:14 – 19 — probably deliberately attacking pagan worship of the heavenly bodies (see G.Von Rad, *Commentary on Genesis* [London: SCM, 1961], in loc.) — describes the sun and moon as mere lamps made by God for lighting the earth. The Lord himself, whose glory set over the city gives the latter its special glory in this chapter, is in fact replacing his creatures — the sun and the moon — with himself. This symbolizes the fact that God’s people, in his community, will always know his presence and the revelation and joy that come from him. This constant fullness of divine light will transform everything, including all the imperfections (“sorrows”) of life.

Verse 21 reminds us of the declarations in Revelation 21 – 22 that only those cleansed of sin may have any part in God’s city. The Lord’s promise to Abraham (Ge 17:8) will be fulfilled. The “shoot” illustration, which has appeared at so many significant points in this book (4:1; 6:13; 11:1; 53:2) is found again. God’s splendor is in fact displayed in the growth and fruitage of this despised shoot, as a study of this theme in the passages quoted above will show. In the present passage, of course, the shoot is Israel (see Introduction, p. 455).

In v.22a the tiny shoot is seen in its fullest development. The second half of v.22 grounds these promises in God’s great name —Yahweh. It is perhaps hinted that the fulfillment of this prophecy will be somewhat remote in time from its utterance. Once the events of the end time begin, however, the total realization of God’s plan for Jerusalem will come to speedy fulfillment.

NOTES

6 Midian (see also 9:4; 10:26) refers to an Arabian merchant people. Ephah is unknown except for Ephah as a son of Midian in Genesis 25:4. Sheba occurs fairly often in the OT and appears to be in southwestern Arabia; its wealth was proverbial (1Ki 10:10; Ps 72:10, 15).

7 For Kedar see Note at 21:16. Nebaioth (cf. Ge 25:13; 28:9) is usually

identified with Nabataea in northern Arabia.

9 For Tarshish see the Note at 2:16.

12 Some commentators (e.g., Westermann, Herbert) dispute the integrity of this verse with the rest of the chapter on the grounds of its prosaic form and its supposed inappropriateness in the context. The former consideration is not decisive, and the latter seems subjective. It goes beyond what is said in vv.10 – 11 but builds on this. If a scribe could be conceived as doing this, why not the prophet himself ?

13 For the trees mentioned here, see the Note at 41:19.

16 The RSV's "you shall suck the breast of kings" is more literal than the NIV's "and be nursed at royal breasts" (cf. 49:23). The picture is strange (Whybray, in loc., dubs it an "absurdity") only if we assume always a straightforward correspondence between an analogy and what it illustrates. Here the application of the analogy is complicated by the fact that a nation's resources were viewed as summed up in its king, not its queen. As Oswalt (in loc.) points out, if kings do not have breasts, neither do nations. He compares v.16 with 49:23 as an expression of care for Israel by the nations.

F. The Year of the Lord's Favor (61:1 – 11)

OVERVIEW

Is there a fifth Servant Song here? Many (especially the older) commentators have thought so, even if the term "Servant Songs" was not used in their day. Most modern commentators do not favor this. They view the speaker as the prophet himself, though there are other views. Herbert (in loc.), for example, takes the speaker to be Zion personified. Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) sees the figure here to be a further messianic figure,"the Anointed Conqueror," separate from the King of chs. 1 – 39 and the Servant of chs. 40 – 55, though with each pointing to and fulfilled in Christ (see comment on 59:21).

What is clear is that Christ identified the speaker with himself in Luke 4:17 – 21 (cf. also Lk 7:22), though this does not prove that it is a Servant Song, for he could have seen himself as the supreme prophet (cf. Ac 3:22ff.), just as the writer to the Hebrews saw him and his people anticipated in Isaiah and his disciples (Heb 2:13; cf. Isa 8:17 – 18). There are, however, a number of links with the Servant Songs. Compare the language of v.1 with 42:1, 7 and 49:9; of v.2 with 49:8; and the use of the expression "Sovereign LORD" in v.1 (*,adon*m *ay*m *yhwh*) with 50:4, 7, 9. There are also links with the Messiah of earlier chapters, especially with 11:1 – 11. Oswalt (in loc.) writes that this shows the synthetic function of chs. 56 – 66 in relation to the book as a whole: "How does Isaiah view the Davidic Messiah, the Ruler of the nations? As the Servant of all. . . . And how does he view the crushed Servant of the Lord? As God's anointed, who comes to destroy the enemies of God with the word of his mouth."

It may also be significant that this passage clearly reflects, as we will show, the Year of Jubilee legislation, and that that year began on the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:9). This provides a link with the sacrificial teaching of 52:13 – 53:12. Kidner (in loc.) says, "Our Lord could quote this passage at the outset of His career because He had already accepted, in His baptism and temptation, the role of suffering Servant, and with it the cross. Those are the 'benefits of His passion'; His miracles spoke the same language." We therefore understand a

theological development here that rests this passage on Isaiah 53, just as the preaching of the gospel in Acts rests on the atoning sacrifice presented in the Gospels.

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion —
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.
4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.
5 Aliens will shepherd your flocks;
foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.
6 And you will be called priests of the LORD,
you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations,
and in their riches you will boast.
7 Instead of their shame
my people will receive a double portion,
and instead of disgrace
they will rejoice in their inheritance;
and so they will inherit a double portion in their land,
and everlasting joy will be theirs.
8 "For I, the LORD, love justice;
I hate robbery and iniquity.
In my faithfulness I will reward them
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge

that they are a people the LORD has blessed."

10 I delight greatly in the LORD;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise
spring up before all nations.

COMMENTARY

1 – 3 These verses present a picture of a man anointed by the Spirit of God especially for the task of preaching (v.1; cf. 1Ki 19:15 – 16). Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) notes a link with 59:21. This anointed one proclaims glad tidings (cf. 40:9; 41:27; 52:7). His anointing with the Spirit of God provides a link with both the kingly and the servant prophecies of this book (11:1; 42:1). Both earlier pictures refer to a ministry through speech (11:4; 49:2). If this person is both king and servant, then already within Isaiah that union of the two in Jesus Christ is anticipated.

Those benefiting from the preacher's message are described as "the poor . . . the brokenhearted [cf. Ps 147:3] . . . the captives . . . the prisoners." The poor may be literal, but the word probably has overtones of piety as well as poverty (e.g., Pss 40:17; 72:12 – 14).The brokenhearted appear as those who mourn and grieve — perhaps for sin (cf. 57:15) or over the destruction of Jerusalem (though this was itself punishment for sin). If it is the latter, the comfort to which reference is made is that given in ch. 40. The poor and the mourners reappear in the Beatitudes given by Jesus (Mt 5:3 – 4).The captives and the prisoners are likely the exiles (cf. 42:22; 49:9; 51:14), so that overtones of a new exodus are still present.

The first two lines of v.2 are important.The term גֹּאֵל ("redeemer"; GK 1457) does not appear in this passage, but in the OT the Year of Jubilee — when slaves were set free and land was returned to its original owners — was closely linked with the legislation providing for the kinsman-redeemer (Lev 25); the same word was used of the avenger of blood (e.g., Nu 35:12). Moreover, the Hebrew word

translated “freedom” in v.1 is *dᵉrôr* (GK 2002), a technical term for the jubilee release in the OT (cf. Lev 25:10, 13; 27:24; Jer 34:8 – 10; Eze 46:17). Here, then, God presents himself both as the Savior and as the Judge.

It is often felt to be significant that Jesus, in quoting these verses, stopped before the reference to “the day of vengeance” (Lk 4:19). Herbert (in loc.), however, raises a question about this, pointing out that Jesus did include the idea of divine vengeance in Luke 18:7 – 8. He writes: “Jesus, like any other rabbi, quoted enough to call the whole passage to mind.”

The threefold bestowal, promised in v.3, expresses the same basic idea in different ways. Ashes were symbolic of deep sorrow; the crown, oil, and garment all suggest preparations for joyous festival.The “oaks of righteous ness” allude to 60:21, but with the thought now individualized. If Matthew 15:13 is based on this, then it is because the Pharisees were too concerned for the display of their own righteousness and not for the glory of the Lord.

4 – 9 There are echoes here of ch. 60, and like them this passage seems to go beyond the OT era for its fulfillment, as much of its detail does not fit the return from exile (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 53). At Sinai God described his people as “a kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:6). This ideal, never fully realized in their history, will now come to pass (v.6). As the Levitical priests were released for their distinctive work because others labored and provided for them, so is Israel’s place among the nations to be. It should be noted that this implies that her priestly ministry is for the nations’ benefit.

The laws of inheritance, so closely linked to the Year of Jubilee regulations, provided for a double inheritance for the firstborn (Dt 21:17). Previously, perhaps because privilege brings greater responsibility, Israel had received double punishment (40:2); now, as God’s “firstborn” among the nations (Ex 4:22 – 23; cf. Ps 89:27, although this refers to their king), she has a double portion in her land (v.7). Probably this means that the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 3:8, 17; et al.) is itself reckoned to be of double value.

The land will be restored to God’s people because those who have taken it had no right to it, and the Lord is a God of justice. The “everlasting covenant” (v.8), preceded by a reference to the divine faithfulness, probably undergirds the

existing covenants, so it is evidence of God's integrity. The reference to their blessing among the nations (v.9) may suggest that it is the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Ge 12:1 – 3) rather than the Davidic (cf. Isa 55:3) that is chiefly in view.

10 – 11 The speaker in these verses is probably personified Zion, who expresses her unbounded joy in God, although Motyer (1993, 1999, in loc.) sees the passage as part of a sequence of anointed-conqueror passages commencing at 59:21. The analogy of clothing (v.10), already used in v.3, appears again. Its appropriateness is due to the fact that clothing often expresses either status or mood or both. Paul uses the same kind of language in relation to Christian salvation (see, e.g., Ro 13:14; Eph 4:22 – 24).

Verse 11 reminds us of 55:10 – 11. If it is an intentional allusion, it supports the theme of God's faithfulness (v.8). God's faithful word will secure the growth of righteous ness and praise in his people, which will be publicly displayed, as at a bridal feast, before all the nations.

Notes

1 פְּקַח קוֹחַ (*pᵉqaḥ qôaḥ*, "release . . . for the prisoners") is preceded by אֲסוּרִים (*ʾᵉsûrîm*,' "captives"). Some Hebrew MSS, including 1QIsaa, take the former phrase to be one word, meaning "opening." The root פקח (*pqḥ*) is regularly used of opening the eyes, and the LXX apparently reads the second word as סַנְוֵרִים (*sanwērîm*,' "blind"). This accounts for the quotation in Luke 4:18: "recovery of sight for the blind."

3 פְּאֵר (*pᵉʾēr*,' "crown, ornamental headdress") and אֵפֶר (*ʾēper*,' "ashes") not only have the same consonants, though in a different order, but also "e" vowels. This wordplay would not be lost on the hearers, especially as it could be highlighted in the pronunciation.

8 The NIV's "iniquity" follows the LXX and other versions in repointing עוֹלָה (*ʿôlâ*,' "burnt offering") to *ʿawlâ* ("iniquity"), which makes better sense, unless 1:13 (see comment there) provides some precedent in this book. The NASB follows the MT.

G. Assured Prayer for Zion's Future (62:1 – 12)

Overview

Herbert (in loc.) declares, "There is a quality of splendid impatience in this chapter, an impatience which is uninhibited within the assurance that God hears and answers." This, of course, assumes that the speaker is the prophet, though some commentators argue that he is probably the Lord, pointing out that here God breaks the silence so often referred to in this book (see 18:4; 42:14; 57:11; 65:6). Young, Whybray, and Oswalt (all in loc.) give arguments for this interpretation. Certainly a good case can be made out for this, though the Lord is spoken of in the third person many times in this chapter. In view of this, and also because the prophet has before appeared as interceding for the people (cf. 51:9), we will assume that it is he who speaks here.

1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.
2 The nations will see your righteousness,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.
3 You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand,
a royal diadem in the hand of your God.
4 No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.
5 As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your sons marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.
6 I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem;
they will never be silent day or night.
You who call on the LORD,
give yourselves no rest,
7 and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem

and makes her the praise of the earth.

8 The LORD has sworn by his right hand
and by his mighty arm:
"Never again will I give your grain
as food for your enemies,
and never again will foreigners drink the new wine
for which you have toiled;

9 but those who harvest it will eat it
and praise the LORD,
and those who gather the grapes will drink it
in the courts of my sanctuary."

10 Pass through, pass through the gates!
Prepare the way for the people.
Build up, build up the highway!
Remove the stones.
Raise a banner for the nations.

11 The LORD has made proclamation
to the ends of the earth:
"Say to the Daughter of Zion,
'See, your Savior comes!
See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.'"

12 They will be called the Holy People,
the Redeemed of the LORD;
and you will be called Sought After,
the City No Longer Deserted.

COMMENTARY

1 – 7 Here the prophet takes his place among the great men of prayer in the OT. He has received a vision of Jerusalem, living in the good of all God's promises and shining with the glory of her God (ch. 60), and he now prays with persistence and deep feeling for that day to come.The most assured praying rests on the promises of God (for an OT example of this, see Ge 32:9 – 12). As in ch. 60, Jerusalem will be a spectacle for the whole world to see. So often in the OT a new name (v.2) is the pledge of divine action to change the status or character of a person (cf., e.g., Ge 17:5, 15). Zion's new name will emerge in vv.4 and 12 and will reflect the grace of God to her, for "the mouth of the LORD" in Isaiah is associated with utterances of grace (cf. 40:5; 58:14). Once again Zion will enjoy an intimate relationship with her God.

The theme of the wife, separated from her husband because of her sin and yearning for reconciliation and home, often appears in this book from ch. 49 onward. It emerges again in vv.4 – 5. In fact, the promise that she will be a crown for her God, “the city walls having the appearance of a tiara” (Whybray, in loc.), may reflect the idea that a wife, especially a queen, should be an adornment to her husband (v.3). The Servant of the Lord is a delight to him (42:1); so is she to be. From a NT perspective, of course, we can view this in terms of the church’s acceptance in Christ (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 53, for general discussion).

Verse 5 presents as strange an analogy as that in 60:16 (see comment there). In both cases there seems to be an intentional breach in the normal application of the analogy, perhaps in the interests of vivid impression. Such analogies puzzle us, but we do not forget them! Moreover, as Jones (in loc.) points out, “the metaphor serves the thought, not the thought the metaphor.” There is, of course, a real sense in which loyal citizens may be said to be married to their city (for an alternative interpretation resting on conjectural emendation, see Notes). The analogy of the bride and groom reminds us of Revelation 21:2, 9; 22:17, chapters influenced by this part of Isaiah.

Verse 6 reminds us that the vision of vv.1b – 5 inspires the prophet in his praying and that prayer continues here. If the speaker is the prophet, not God (see Overview to this chapter), the watchmen here may be his fellow prophets (cf. Eze 3:17) or the godly in general, protecting the city from the ravaging forces of evil by their prayers. If, however, the speaker is God, then the watchmen may still be the godly at prayer, fulfilling a function analogous to the *mazkîr* (see Notes). Of course true prayer, if it is guided by the Spirit of God, begins as well as ends at the throne of God. We have here the language of accommodation (cf. Ps 44:23), for God really needs no reminding; but he does graciously involve others, through prayer, in the fulfillment of his great purposes. This passage may well furnish part at least of the OT background to the parables of importunate prayer told by our Lord (Lk 11:5 – 10; 18:1 – 8).

8 – 9 These words are particularly assuring to Zion’s praying watchmen. The solemn oath of God underlines his faithfulness (v.8; cf. Isa 54:9; Heb 6:13 – 20; 7:20 – 28) and the fact that he has sworn by his mighty arm stresses his ability to carry out his word; for his arm is the executor of the divine will, its power in salvation already wonderfully demonstrated (cf. 53:1). Through much of Zion’s

history she had been subject to assault from her enemies and been robbed of her food supplies either by marauding armies (1:7 – 8) or as the payment of taxes to foreign overlords. God warned her that disobedience would bring this about; but now, through his own gracious action, she is righ teous (62:1), and the Lord promises that this will never occur again.The temple courts will in fact throng with worshipers offering the harvest firstfruits to the Lord and rejoicing before him (v.9; cf. Dt 14:22 – 26; Isa 9:3).

10 – 11a Here phraseology is gathered from a number of previous utterances (see esp. 40:3; 48:20; 49:22; 52:11; 57:14). For the doubled imperative (v.10) see comments on 51:9. There will be a massive pilgrimage to the city. Thus, a road-building and road-clearing project is to be undertaken, with the banner and a proclamation (v.11a) providing visible and audible signals to the nations of its completion. As ch. 60 shows, they will be instrumental in enabling the dispersed to return, and many of them will themselves come.

11b – 12 Knight (in loc.) refers to “the ecstatic mixture of metaphors” in these verses. For v.11b, see especially 40:10 – 11. Here is salvation in its final stage, the fulfillment of all that has gone before. Verse 12 takes up and develops the theme of v.4, rather in the way that the name of 7:14 is given further exposition in 9:6. All these names bring out different aspects of God’s grace toward his people (cf. Hos 1). The first goes back to the beginnings of their history as a nation (Ex 19:6). Then, too, they first knew what it was to be the Lord’s redeemed people, but before the consummation this experience will have been filled out with other wonders of redeeming grace. Jerusalem’s destiny as the wife of the Lord will find complete fulfillment, for he has sought to win her from her sin and restore her to everlasting married fellowship with himself.

NOTES

4 The meanings of the names Hephzibah and Beulah are given in the NIV margin as “my delight is in her” and “married” respectively.

5 Some commentators emend בָּנַיִךְ (*bānāyik*, “your sons”) to ËnEBo (*bon*m *ek* m , “your Builder”; cf. NIV mg.),but it is doubtful whether this is necessary (see comment).

6 Whybray (in loc.) expounds the view that הַמַּזְכִּירִים (*hammazkîrîm*, “you who call on”; RSV, “you who put . . . in remembrance”) is connected with the מַזְכִּיר (*mazkîr*, “recorder”; 1Sa 8:16; 1Ki 4:3; Isa 36:3), with an assumed etymology from the verb זָכַר (*zākar*, “remember”). He writes: “If this is so, Yahweh as a great king is here seen as having recorders among his heavenly courtiers, one of whose functions was to see that the programme of duties to which he was committed did not go by default.” He agrees, however, that neither the meaning of the word nor the functions of the office is entirely clear. There are too many imponderables for us to espouse this interpretation.

H. The Lord the Avenger (63:1 – 6)

1 Who is this coming from Edom,
from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson?
Who is this, robed in splendor,
striding forward in the greatness of his strength?
"It is I, speaking in righteousness,
mighty to save."
2 Why are your garments red,
like those of one treading the winepress?
3 "I have trodden the winepress alone;
from the nations no one was with me.
I trampled them in my anger
and trod them down in my wrath;
their blood spattered my garments,
and I stained all my clothing.
4 For the day of vengeance was in my heart,
and the year of my redemption has come.
5 I looked, but there was no one to help,
I was appalled that no one gave support;
so my own arm worked salvation for me,
and my own wrath sustained me.
6 I trampled the nations in my anger;
in my wrath I made them drunk
and poured their blood on the ground."

COMMENTARY

1 – 6 Is it possible, as has been suggested, that this is a sixth Servant Song? Verse 4 and 61:2 show that there is a thematic link at least with ch. 61, and if that chapter is a Servant Song (see comments there), then we conceive this also to be one. Does the strong emphasis on divine wrath make this impossible? Only if we deny that the God of the Servant Songs is the God of the OT generally, for he is a God of both wrath and grace. Isaiah 53:6, 10 clearly imply that there was divine necessity as well as divine grace in the sacrificial death of his Servant. If the Servant's death and vindication were unique, divine acts, then it is apt that the series should come to its close with an assurance of judgment on those who continue in rebellion.

The oracle is most dramatic.The only OT passage that in any way resembles it is the account of Joshua's encounter with the angelic captain of the Lord's host (Jos 5:13 – 6:5). There too, as here, are two questions and two answers; and there is a similar anxious inquiry: "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

Westermann (in loc.) comments on the "consummate artistry" in our present passage. The city watchman or sentry peers anxiously out at a solitary and majestic figure, who appears on the scene clothed in a garment spattered with crimson (v.1).When he first comes into view, it is clear that he is coming from the direction of Bozrah, Edom's capital.That Edom means "red" (cf. Ge 25:30 mg.) is particularly apt in this context. Is this fearsome figure who has been executing judgment on Edom now coming to judge Jerusalem (cf. Am 1:11 – 12; 2:4 – 5)? The answer makes it clear, albeit indirectly, that this is the Lord himself. In fact, the element of indirectness, with its overtones of mystery, underlines the divine nature of the warrior (cf. 59:17 – 18). It is clear, too, that he comes to his people not as their judge but as their righteous Savior.

As the figure draws nearer, the watchman directs a question to him, perhaps still with a measure of apprehension.The winepress metaphor (v.2) has no relevance to atonement but only to judgment (cf. Rev 14:19 – 20; 19:11 – 16), though atonement itself involves the bearing of the wrath of God. The book of Revelation clearly takes this passage to be fulfilled in Christ as the Judge of the world, and his title "the Word of God" there is probably reminiscent of the reference to speech at the close of v.1. Jones (in loc.) says, "God's speech is also action." The Lord declares that he has executed the judgment himself alone (v.3; cf. 44:24; 59:16). This strongly suggests that the passage looks beyond historical judgments — in which God uses one nation to punish another — to the eschatological day of God's wrath.

The day of vengeance and the year of redemption (v.4) belong together to the same complex of ideas, involving the *gō'ēl* ("redeemer"; see comment on 61:1 – 3). God's act of judgment against Edom is clearly conceived to be a putting right of the wrongs done to Zion (see 34:8 – 15). Such judgment would be seen as completely appropriate by hearers in the eighth century BC (cf.Am 1:11 – 12) but would seem even more so later, for the Edomites added to their earlier sins by taking advantage of Judah's weakness after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians (La 4:21 – 22; Eze 25:12 – 14; 35:1 – 15; Ob 1 – 14).Thus, as at the exodus from Egypt and also at the return from exile — preceded as it was by the

judgment on Babylon through the Persians — judgment and redemption will be effected through the same events.

Verse 5 reminds us of Revelation 5 and the search for someone to open the Book of Destiny, with its revelation of the ultimate judgments. This in fact testifies to the universality of sin.Verse 6 widens the judgment, making it clear that Edom is simply an appropriate example of the judgment of God on the nations. In many prophetic passages, in fact, Edom appears to represent Gentiles under divine judgment (see comment on 34:5 – 7). Knight (in loc.) points out that Edom and Adam differ in Hebrew only in their vowels, not in their consonants, so that, in terms of punning wordplay, it is possible that a point is being made about a wider judgment. For the reference to drunkenness as a picture of the divine wrath, see comments on 51:22 – 23.

Thexton (in loc.) comments on this passage: “While the vision taken as a whole is suggestive of Christ’s work as Judge, there are nonetheless certain features of it which do anticipate His work as Savior.” He instances Christ’s solitariness in his work of saving his people from their enemies, the fact that the cross stands for the judgment of the world as well as its salvation, and that “the destruction of mankind’s most implacable enemies is both the aim and the fruit of his sacrifice” (ibid).

I. A Psalm of Praise and Lamentation (63:7 – 64:12)

OVERVIEW

Since the start of ch. 60, Isaiah's prophecies have majored in the theme of Zion's exaltation, the final fulfillment of all God's purposes for her.What effect will the reception of such visions have on the man who has received them? No doubt they will fill him with a deep, almost agonized longing for their fulfillment, especially if he is passing through a period of intense, God-given awareness that Judah's sin is going to bring devastating judgment through the Babylonians. Just as the Spirit of God used such moods in the psalmists to produce many an impassioned lamentation, so he does with Isaiah.

Indeed, this passage is really a psalm of communal lamentation, wherein the prophet's identification with the nation becomes the means by which he expresses the deep longing of the most spiritually sensitive in it. Such prayers were part of the prophetic ministry, as we see many times in the life of Moses and also in passages such as 1 Sam uel 12:19 – 25; Jeremiah 15:1; Amos 7:1 – 6. We have already overheard Isaiah himself engaging in prayer on the people's behalf (e.g., 6:11; 25:1 – 5; 51:9 – 10; 59:9 – 15; 62:1).

7 I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD,
the deeds for which he is to be praised,
according to all the LORD has done for us —
yes, the many good things he has done
for the house of Israel,
according to his compassion and many kindnesses.
8 He said,"Surely they are my people,
sons who will not be false to me";
and so he became their Savior.
9 In all their distress he too was distressed,
and the angel of his presence saved them.
In his love and mercy he redeemed them;
he lifted them up and carried them
all the days of old.
10 Yet they rebelled
and grieved his Holy Spirit.

So he turned and became their enemy
and he himself fought against them.
11 Then his people recalled the days of old,
the days of Moses and his people —
where is he who brought them through the sea,
with the shepherd of his flock?
Where is he who set
his Holy Spirit among them,
12 who sent his glorious arm of power
to be at Moses' right hand,
who divided the waters before them,
to gain for himself everlasting renown,
13 who led them through the depths?
Like a horse in open country,
they did not stumble;
14 like cattle that go down to the plain,
they were given rest by the Spirit of the LORD.
This is how you guided your people
to make for yourself a glorious name.
15 Look down from heaven and see
from your lofty throne, holy and glorious.
Where are your zeal and your might?
Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us.
16 But you are our Father,
though Abraham does not know us
or Israel acknowledge us;
you, O LORD, are our Father,
our Redeemer from of old is your name.
17 Why, O LORD, do you make us wander from your ways
and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?
Return for the sake of your servants,
the tribes that are your inheritance.
18 For a little while your people possessed your holy place,
but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary.
19 We are yours from of old;
but you have not ruled over them,
they have not been called by your name.
64:1 Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

4 Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
5 You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.
But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
6 All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righ teous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
7 No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and made us waste away because of our sins.
8 Yet, O LORD, you are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look upon us, we pray,
for we are all your people.
10 Your sacred cities have become a desert;
even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation.
11 Our holy and glorious temple, where our fathers praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.
12 After all this, O LORD, will you hold yourself back?
Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?

COMMENTARY

7 – 10 The repeated word “kindnesses” in v.7 is the Hebrew *h.esed*, the love that is faithful to the covenant (well translated as “steadfast love” in the RSV). It is altogether fitting that the prophet should commence with praise, for God has never failed to honor his covenantal promises even though his people have so often proved untrue to him.There is a threefold reference to his deeds in v.7, for it is in them that his faithfulness has revealed itself.

Verses 8 – 10, using language of accommodation (cf. Calvin, in loc.), present

a picture of God as a disappointed father facing the fact that his children have rebelled against him (cf. 1:3 – 6).This does not, of course, deny his omniscience or even the sovereignty of his purpose but instead expresses for the reader that Israel's rebellion ought never to have been and that it was an offense against love as well as holiness.

God, declaring himself to be his people's father (v.8; cf. Ex 4:22 – 23), promised to save them from Egypt, declaring that he knew their afflictions (Ex 3:7 – 10).Verse 9 is one of the most moving expressions of the compassionate love of God in the OT, reminding the reader of some of the great passages in Hosea, Isaiah's older contemporary. There are Trinitarian overtones in the passage, for "the angel of his presence" — in whom the Lord was personally present — apparently refers to Exodus 23:20 – 23, in combination with Exodus 33:12 – 14; and "his Holy Spirit" (cf. Nu 11:17, 25 – 29) — who can be grieved (cf. Eph 4:30) — is clearly personal (cf. 48:16 and comments there). The latter expression is found elsewhere in the OT only in Psalm 51:11 and similarly in a moral context.The people's rebellion brought God into conflict with them, as he had threatened (Ex 23:21; cf. Ex 32).

11 – 14 A wistful note enters the psalm. The prophet, still dwelling on the past deeds of God for his people, suggests in his questions that things have changed since "the days of old" (v.11). A comparison with the somewhat similar passage in 51:9 – 10 reveals a difference of tone. The focus of attention is still the events of the exodus period, when the nation came into being. Moses, like David, was taken from pasturing the flock to leadership of Israel, thus symbolizing the self-forgetful care God expects in those in authority over his people.The right arm of Moses (v.12) symbolized and was accompanied by the right arm of God, for the exodus was an act of divine power (see comments at 51:9; 52:10; 53:1).

The two analogies of vv.12b – 14 point to the conditions of the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River respectively. The people found the seabed — and perhaps the wilderness afterwards — easy to negotiate; and, descending from the plateau of Moab to the Jordan and across it, they were like a herd of cattle being led into green pasture. The word "rest" is reminiscent of passages such as Deuteronomy 12:10 and Joshua 21:44, though Hebrews 3 – 4 teaches that there is a deeper rest available in Christ.

15 – 19 The wistful note that began in the last few verses now becomes explicit, and the characteristics of a communal lamentation appear clearly. In his prayer at the consecration of the temple, Solomon had called on God to hear his people's cry from his heavenly dwelling place (1Ki 8:44 – 53), and Isaiah has shown a personal awareness of God as exalted in his holiness (e.g., 6:1 – 4; 57:15). This exalted God has pledged his zeal in the cause of his people (9:7; 37:32); but now, as he foresees the temple and its ruin, the prophet identifies with the people's cry for mercy.

In v.16 we have the first two of three references to God as "Father" (cf. also 64:8). Kidner (in loc.) says that this repeated plea "gives this prayer its special intensity, as the sense of estrangement struggles with that of acceptance." In fact, the sense of relationship with God as seen here goes even deeper than national solidarity. It is the deepest fact of the people's life. Oswalt (in loc.) says, "Israel is not an ethnic, or linguistic, or national entity, but a spiritual one."

Verse 17 makes us think of Isaiah's commission and the warning he received (cf. 6:9 – 13) that through his verbal ministry the people would become hardened in sin.The prayer perhaps alludes also to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the exodus story, which has provided so much background to the thought here. It recognizes that God has established that moral law in which sin hardens the heart and does so by divine design (cf. Ro 1:18 – 32). The word "return" may suggest the return of the Shekinah glory to the temple as the symbol of God's dwelling among his people (cf. Eze 43:1 – 12). Certainly v.18 implies that their sense of alienation from him is not unconnected with the destruction of their sanctuary. Motyer (1999, in loc.) suggests that the verbs of vv.18 – 19 may be "perfects of certainty": "For a while your people have possessed . . . our adversaries are sure to tread down . . . we are to become . . . ." There is a deep sense of special election in v.19.

64:1 – 7 The longing for renewed blessing expressed in the closing verses of the previous chapter is now poured out in the passionate outburst of v.1. The exodus was followed by the great revelation at Sinai, when the mountain trembled at the presence of God (Ex 19:16 – 19). On that occasion God descended on the mount (Ex 19:18). Here the prophet graphically conceives of the very heavens being rent by Israel's God in his eagerness to be once more in the midst of his people. The illustration of v.2 sets forth the judgment of God. Pharaoh and the Egyptians learned the power of God's name at the exodus (Ex

14:3, 18). The Sinai revelation made God's people tremble; this new disclosure of him will terrify the nations of the world.

What is God like, this God of the exodus and Sinai who revealed himself to his people? He is the God of the unexpected (v.3), for in so many of the plagues the ordinary course of nature was interrupted. He is a unique God, for all other so-called deities are impotent. Paul used the words of v.4 in 1 Corinthians 2:9, in the conviction that God still acts in behalf of those who wait on him. He is also a God of righteous ness, caring about the obedience of his people to his laws. It is this ethical quality in him — and therefore an element of his nature as true to that early revelation as his saving grace manifested in the exodus — that is revealed over against the sins of his people.

Verses 5 – 7 present a many-sided doctrine of sin, remarkably full for an OT passage. Sin is a continual practice; it is defiling, it is destructive, and it creates a barrier between God and human beings — both from humanity's side, for we do not want to pray, and from God's, because he will not hear us. It is God himself who has determined that it will have these results (cf. v.7 with 63:17). No wonder the people cry out, "How then can we be saved?" (v.5).

8 – 12 Verse 8 suddenly moves from the thought of God as the moral governor, to whom his people are responsible, to the Father, who brought them into being. Both Jeremiah (Jer 18:1 – 6) and Paul (Ro 9:19 – 21) develop the analogy of the potter and the clay; both do so in contexts that, as here, present God as sovereign in the realm of sin and judgment. The people cast themselves on God's mercy, calling on him to remember not their sins but their standing as his people (v.9).

Because the land is itself holy, so are all of its cities, though the prophet lays special emphasis on the desolation of Jerusalem (v.10). There is an appeal to the fact that the land is his and that it was to him that the praises of earlier generations were offered in the temple he had set apart for that purpose — before the people state their own deep sense of loss: "All that we treasured lies in ruins" (v.11). See also the comment on 63:17 – 19.

The final verse (v.12) implores God to intervene and bring to his people that forgiveness and salvation promised over and over again in this book, especially

since ch. 40. What response does God make to this prayer? The two closing chapters of the prophecy will show us.

NOTES

7 N. H. Snaith, in his "Isaiah 40 – 66: A Study of the Teaching of the Second Isaiah and Its Consequences" (Orlinsky and Snaith, 235), following L. E. Browne, argues that the writer of this psalm "is speaking on behalf of a group who are being denied a place among the People of God"; in fact, that it expresses the heart-cry of the Samaritans, who were denied a place by the Jews who had come back from the exile. The theory is ingenious, but hard evidence for it is lacking. Theologically, vv.7 – 8 are important for the whole psalm because they place the situation in a covenantal context and, therefore, already anticipate a continuing purpose of God for his people.

9 "He too was distressed" (lit., "there was distress to him") follows the Qere, לוֹ (*lô*, "to him") — rather than the Kethiv, לֹא (*lō'*, "not") — with most English versions, but against 1QIsa (contrast also the NEB). Young (in loc.) appeals to Judges 10:16 as theological support for the Qere reading (see also Oswalt, in loc.). פָּנָיו (*pānāyw*, "his presence") is literally "his face."

11 The text of the NIV reads, "then his people recalled"; the margin gives the alternative: "But may he recall." In fact, the NIV's text involves altering the verbal form to the plural, which reads more naturally, though the singular does make sense, despite the awkwardness of an abrupt change from God to the people for the questions. In the phrase "Moses and his people," the conjunction appears to have fallen out of the text, but the NIV supplies it.

"The shepherd" follows the LXX and Targum.The MT has the plural, which cannot be ruled out, for it may include Aaron and perhaps others.The text of v.11 certainly seems to have suffered in transmission. For further comment, see Whybray (in loc.).

18 – 19 These verses also contain translation problems. The issues are somewhat complex.Young (in loc.) presents other possibilities and J. L.

McKenzie (*Second Isaiah* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968], in loc.) conjectural emendations.The NIV and NASB have a measure of agreement as to the meaning of v.18 and are probably correct, while they render v.19 a little differently, with both renderings being feasible. See also the comments in Oswalt (in loc.).

64:1 Our verse numbering in this chapter follows the English versions; the MT's numbering is different.

4 – 5[3 – 4] Young (in loc.) has a special note on the textual difficulties of these two verses. Again the NIV represents well the basic thrust of the passage and without emending the text (see also S. H. Blank, "'And All Our Virtues' — An Interpretation of Isaiah 64, 4b – 5a," *JBL* 71 [1952]: 149 – 54).

6[5] טָמֵא (*tāmēʾ*, "unclean") is a technical term for ritual impurity, and בֶּגֶד עִדִּים (*beged ʿiddîm*) means "menstrual cloth."

J. The Great Final Issues (65:1 – 66:24)

OVERVIEW

These two chapters are not only the end of the book but also its climax. In them the eschatology reaches its zenith, for the promise of new heavens and a new earth (65:17; 66:22) not only goes beyond anything else in the book, but even the speculative imagination cannot conceive any greater reality. At the same time, the spiritual challenge to the reader and the ultimate issues of destiny are presented with great power.

It must also be said, however, that Chris tian readers sometimes leave a perusal of these chapters with a sense of disappointment. So much of the book has ministered Christ to them, but where is their beloved Savior in these closing chapters? Surely here, if anywhere, he would be set forth in all of his glory! Yet he does not seem to be present in a single verse. If, however, the chapters be read not in isolation from the rest of the book but as a concluding study, a number of passages will call to mind the earlier, strongly Christological passages. In fact, Christ is as truly present here as God is in the book of Esther.

Chapter 64 was an impassioned prayer in which the people, represented by the prophet, stated their sense of relationship to God but also made frank confession of their sins, crying to him for mercy. Can chs. 65 – 66 be regarded as God’s answer? Thexton (in loc.), among others, says they cannot, because in ch. 64 the prophet confesses sin on behalf of the whole people, while here it appears that the community is divided into two groups — the penitent and the impenitent.True, but does this really affect the matter? A man of deep spiritual sensitivity may, like Daniel (Da 9) or Ezra (Ezr 9), take the burden of a whole community’s sins on his heart and confess those sins with a depth of feeling that may be shared, in fact, by few of his compatriots. Isaiah, at his call, had confessed not only his personal sin but also that of his people generally (6:5). We will then treat these chapters as God’s answer to the prayer of ch. 64. See Oswalt (in loc.) who supports this position.

1 “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me;
I was found by those who did not seek me.
To a nation that did not call on my name,
I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’
2 All day long I have held out my hands
to an obstinate people,
who walk in ways not good,
pursuing their own imaginations —
3 a people who continually provoke me
to my very face,
offering sacrifices in gardens
and burning incense on altars of brick;
4 who sit among the graves
and spend their nights keeping secret vigil;
who eat the flesh of pigs,
and whose pots hold broth of unclean meat;
5 who say, ‘Keep away; don’t come near me,
for I am too sacred for you!’
Such people are smoke in my nostrils,
a fire that keeps burning all day.
6 “See, it stands written before me:
I will not keep silent but will pay back in full;
I will pay it back into their laps —
7 both your sins and the sins of your fathers,”
says the LORD.
“Because they burned sacrifices on the mountains
and defi ed me on the hills,
I will measure into their laps
the full payment for their former deeds.”
8 This is what the LORD says:
“As when juice is still found in a cluster of grapes
and men say, ‘Don’t destroy it,
there is yet some good in it,’
so will I do in behalf of my servants;
I will not destroy them all.
9 I will bring forth descendants from Jacob,
and from Judah those who will possess my mountains;
my chosen people will inherit them,
and there will my servants live.
10 Sharon will become a pasture for flocks,
and the Valley of Achor a resting place for herds,
for my people who seek me.
11 “But as for you who forsake the LORD
and forget my holy mountain,
who spread a table for Fortune
and fill bowls of mixed wine for Destiny,

12 I will destine you for the sword,
and you will all bend down for the slaughter;
for I called but you did not answer,
I spoke but you did not listen.
You did evil in my sight
and chose what displeases me.”
13 Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
“My servants will eat,
but you will go hungry;
my servants will drink,
but you will go thirsty;
my servants will rejoice,
but you will be put to shame.
14 My servants will sing
out of the joy of their hearts,
but you will cry out
from anguish of heart
and wail in brokenness of spirit.
15 You will leave your name
to my chosen ones as a curse;
the Sovereign LORD will put you to death,
but to his servants he will give another name.
16 Whoever invokes a blessing in the land
will do so by the God of truth;
he who takes an oath in the land
will swear by the God of truth.
For the past troubles will be forgotten
and hidden from my eyes.
17 “Behold, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be remembered,
nor will they come to mind.
18 But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.
19 I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.
20 “Never again will there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not live out his years;
he who dies at a hundred
will be thought a mere youth;
he who fails to reach a hundred
will be considered accursed.

21 They will build houses and dwell in them;
    they will plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
22 No longer will they build houses and others live in them,
    or plant and others eat.
For as the days of a tree,
    so will be the days of my people;
my chosen ones will long enjoy
    the works of their hands.
23 They will not toil in vain
    or bear children doomed to misfortune;
for they will be a people blessed by the LORD,
    they and their descendants with them.
24 Before they call I will answer;
    while they are still speaking I will hear.
25 The wolf and the lamb will feed together,
    and the lion will eat straw like the ox,
    but dust will be the serpent's food.
They will neither harm nor destroy
    on all my holy mountain,"
    says the LORD.
66:1 This is what the LORD says:
"Heaven is my throne,
    and the earth is my footstool.
Where is the house you will build for me?
    Where will my resting place be?
2 Has not my hand made all these things,
    and so they came into being?"
        declares the LORD.
"This is the one I esteem:
    he who is humble and contrite in spirit,
    and trembles at my word.
3 But whoever sacrifices a bull
    is like one who kills a man,
and whoever offers a lamb,
    like one who breaks a dog's neck;
whoever makes a grain offering
    is like one who presents pig's blood,
and whoever burns memorial incense,
    like one who worships an idol.
They have chosen their own ways,
    and their souls delight in their abominations;
4 so I also will choose harsh treatment for them
    and will bring upon them what they dread.
For when I called, no one answered,
    when I spoke, no one listened.
They did evil in my sight
    and chose what displeases me."

5 Hear the word of the LORD,
you who tremble at his word:
“Your brothers who hate you,
and exclude you because of my name, have said,
‘Let the LORD be glorified,
that we may see your joy!’
Yet they will be put to shame.
6 Hear that uproar from the city,
hear that noise from the temple!
It is the sound of the LORD
repaying his enemies all they deserve.
7 “Before she goes into labor,
she gives birth;
before the pains come upon her,
she delivers a son.
8 Who has ever heard of such a thing?
Who has ever seen such things?
Can a country be born in a day
or a nation be brought forth in a moment?
Yet no sooner is Zion in labor
than she gives birth to her children.
9 Do I bring to the moment of birth
and not give delivery?” says the LORD.
“Do I close up the womb
when I bring to delivery?” says your God.
10 “Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice greatly with her,
all you who mourn over her.
11 For you will nurse and be satisfied
at her comforting breasts;
you will drink deeply
and delight in her overflowing abundance.”
12 For this is what the LORD says:
“I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream;
you will nurse and be carried on her arm
and dandled on her knees.
13 As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;,
and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.”
14 When you see this, your heart will rejoice
and you will fl ourish like grass;
the hand of the LORD will be made known to his servants,
but his fury will be shown to his foes.
15 See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind;

he will bring down his anger with fury,
and his rebuke with fl ames of fi re.
16 For with fire and with his sword
the LORD will execute judgment upon all men,
and many will be those slain by the LORD.

17 “Those who consecrate and purify themselves to go into the gardens, following the one in the midst of those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and other abominable things — they will meet their end together,” declares the LORD.

18 “And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory.

19 “I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations — to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. 20 And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD — on horses, in chariots and wagons, and on mules and camels,” says the LORD.“They will bring them, as the Israelites bring their grain offerings, to the temple of the LORD in ceremonially clean vessels. 21 And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,” says the LORD.

22 “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,” declares the LORD, “so will your name and descendants endure. 23 From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,” says the LORD. 24 “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

COMMENTARY

1 – 5 At the outset we encounter a major difference in interpretation in which the bulk of modern commentators diverge sharply from the traditional interpretation still taken by most conservative scholars and reflected in the NIV. Paul applies vv.1 – 2 to the Gentiles in Romans 10:20 – 21. Many modern commentators, however, hold that this is a misapplication — or at best a reapplication — of the prophetic words to a similar but not identical situation, for they take both verses to apply properly to the Jews. The RSV translates, “I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me.”

The Hebrew construction is Niphal *tolerativum*: “I permitted myself to be sought”; but, as Kidner (in loc.) points out, this construction always refers to actual events, not simply to an attitude. He says, “Nowhere else does this construction imply a nonevent.” The NIV is somewhat disappointing when it

translates, “to a nation that did not call on my name” (cf also the NASB), following the LXX and Targum but not the MT, which reads, “to a nation that was not called by my name.” We therefore take it that v.1 applies to the Gentiles and v.2 to the Jews. This then reminds us of the work of the Messiah, through whom the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth (11:9), and especially of the Servant of the Lord, whose work will savingly enlighten the nations (42:6) through his sufferings and exaltation (52:15).

Verse 2 presents God’s hands held out in love “all day long,” meaning perhaps throughout Israel’s history, but finding obstinate rejection of his ways (cf. 64:5). “Imaginations” may refer to the sinful product of the unsanctified imagination in idols. “Continually” in v.3 seems to answer to “all day long” in v.2, with the thought that the people’s sinful insults to God were as constant and longstanding as his own gracious overtures to them.

The catalog of sins in vv.3 – 4 reminds us in some ways of the sins of Revelation 21:8; 22:15, which lead to the second death and thus exclude those who practice them from the Holy City. For “offering sacrifices in gardens,” see Note at 1:29. “Burning incense on altars of brick” must, because of its context, be pagan, though its exact significance is unknown. The first half of v.4 refers to the forbidden practice of necromancy (cf. 57:9; Dt 18:9 – 13), while v.4b probably refers to flagrant disregard of the laws about unclean meats that, even if occurring within the context of Yahwistic worship, show a rebellious outlook.

There is a tone of irony in v.5a. Paganism has its “holy” men, and these people, in their fancied sanctity, instill fear in others lest they should come too close to them and be harmed. These descriptions of sin begin to give place to the assurance of punishment at the close of the verse (cf. Dt 32:22; Jer 17:4).

6 – 7 The introductory “see” (v.6) is a call to attention. God has those sins written before him (cf. Rev 20:12). The people’s prayer in 64:12 is answered, but not in the way they would hope for. In responding to our prayers, God always keeps within the spiritual and moral structure he has himself established. His judgment on a nation often awaits the full term of its sin (Ge 15:16; Da 8:23; Mt 23:32; 1Th 2:16; cf. Rev 14:15). The mountain shrines were centers of idolatrous worship (cf. 57:7; Jer 3:6; et al.).

8 – 10 Here again is the important doctrine of the remnant, which played such a big part in earlier chapters of the prophecy and has important links with the Messiah (see Introduction, p. 450). In much the same way, Paul modified the concept of a rejecting and rejected Israel in Romans 9 – 11.The vineyard of Israel, so unproductive (Isa 5:1 – 4), has nevertheless produced some genuine grapes; and these are recognized (v.8). They are the servants of God (see comment on 54:17). In them the promises to the "chosen people" (v.9) find their fulfillment, for this remnant is "my people who seek me" (v.10). Those who received the great OT revelation have a responsibility to seek the Lord on the basis of it, while those who had never known its light will receive it through a new divine initiative (v.1).

Sharon was beautiful and fertile; but Achor had an ominous sound, for it symbolized God's judgment on his people (Jos 7:24 – 26). Hosea, Isaiah's older contemporary, had, however, presented the divine promise: "I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope" (Hos 2:15).

11 – 12 Here God turns to the rebels among his people. The reference to the holy mountain (v.11) refers to the forsaking of the worship of the Lord at his temple. This true worship involved the offering of items connected with the people's food and drink.Instead, these are being presented to pagan deities (see Notes; 1Co 10:21 – 22 probably alludes to this passage).Verse 12 recalls v.2 (cf. also 55:1 – 7).

13 – 16 The term "Sovereign LORD" (, *adon*m *ay*m *yhwh*) was characteristic of two passages picturing the Servant of the Lord (48:16; 50:4 – 9). Here (vv.13, 15) the term occurs again, providing a link between the Servant and the servants similar perhaps to that between the Messiah and the remnant in the earlier part of the book. Revelation 22:3, 6 refer to the "servants of God" in the final vision of the Bible. Those addressed in these verses as "you" are, of course, the same rebels God speaks to in vv.11 – 12.

In Revelation God's people are promised food, drink, and table fellowship (Rev 2:7, 17; 3:20; 21:6; 22:17). As there, so also here, those still in their sins will be excluded from the joy of it all, and their name will be a byword among God's people for the curse of God. The true servants of God will have a new name (v.15; cf. Rev 2:17), perhaps the name of their God (Rev 3:12), the "God

of truth" (v.16; cf. Rev 3:14). This name is unique to this passage in the OT and so appropriate to a description of the eschatological climax in which all God's promises will be fulfilled and his truth demonstrated.The final promise of v.16 takes its significance from the fact that the nation's troubles had been the result of its sins.This full and free forgiveness will be achieved through the sacrifice of God's Servant (ch. 53).

17 – 25 The great promise, with its introductory call to special attention — "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (v.17; cf. Rev 21:1) — consists of only seven words in Hebrew; yet its implications are staggering. The whole created order is to be renewed. Great and new as this promise is, the reader does not come to it completely unprepared, for it builds on passages such as 11:1 – 9 and ch. 24. For those whose imagination cannot cope with the macrocosm, the prophet indicates that Jerusalem, too, is to be created anew (v.18). Young (in loc.) reminds us of 63:9. The God who has identified with his people in their affliction will now do so in their joy (v.19). The former sorrows will be over (cf. Rev 21:4).

The picture given in v.20, taken literally, promises greatly extended but not infinite life; yet v.19 declares that weeping will be banished! This suggests that we are meant to dwell on the positive blessings outlined in v.20 and not on their negative implications. Nevertheless, if we take the references to death seriously, we have here a blessed but not ideal state, not quite parallel, therefore, to the whole of Revelation 21:4 (for fuller comment, see the Introduction, pp. 450 – 53).

The people's state of blessedness is portrayed largely in terms reminiscent of the "godly materialism" of Deuteronomy (vv.21 – 23; cf. also 62:8 – 9). The greatest of all the blessings they will know, however, will be a relationship with God in which there is complete harmony between their prayer and his will, between his desire to provide and their dependence on him to give (v.24). Verse 25, taken almost entirely from 11:6 – 9, is a reminder that these blessings come only through the Messiah, while the words "dust will be the serpent's food" (alluding to Ge 3:14) remind us that the overthrow of Satan, the great serpent (Rev 20:2), is the result of the work of the woman's offspring (Ge 3:15).

66:1 – 2a There was a reference to Jerusalem in 65:18 – 19 and to its holy

mountain (65:11), but no express mention of the temple. What place is that to have in God's new order? These verses could mean that this great God, who cannot be contained in the whole of the old created order (cf. 1Ki 8:27), can have no appropriate temple at all. But the postexilic temple was built at his command, so the passage must mean rather that no edifice made by human hands can be more than a symbol — and the symbol can come to be cherished above the reality, as Stephen made clear (Ac 7:44 – 53).

2b – 4 Isaiah 57:15 refers to God's heavenly dwelling and the fellowship he offers to the contrite and lowly in spirit. There is, therefore, a particular aptness about the placing of v.2b here. At Sinai, where the sacrificial system was given but before its details were made known, God's people trembled when the Ten Commandments were heard (Ex 20:18 – 21). Here it is clearly a humble, sensitive reverence for God's word that is in view. This thought governs v.3, where the teaching is even stronger than in 1:10 – 20. The most sacred exercises of true God-given religion are like the worst of sins when they are divorced from humility of spirit.

Verse 4 repeats the thought of 65:12. This is all the more striking in the light of the context of the words in ch. 65, for there it is paganism that forsakes the holy mountain of God that is being condemned. Paganism that sets aside God's word and ritualism that obeys it in the letter only, and not the spirit, are alike abominations to the Lord.

5 – 6 Once more God's word passes from his enemies within Israel (vv.3 – 4) to his servants. Kidner (in loc.) says, "The intolerance in verse 5 was acted out almost to the letter in Jn 9:24, 34. It is one of the earliest allusions to purely religious persecution and theological hatred." The words in v.5b are, of course, uttered in irony.Verse 6 certainly implies that in some sense (see comment on v.1) God accepted the Jerusalem temple as his, for it was from there that he revealed his wrath against his enemies. The mind of the Chris tian reader is irresistibly drawn to our Lord's cleansing of the temple (see comment on 56:7).

7 – 11 In 54:1 – 3, as after the fourth Servant Song, Zion is told to rejoice and prepare her tent for a great influx of inhabitants. This is emphasized again, with special stress on the suddenness of it. The questions of v.9 are making the point that God promises not only a speedy but also a complete work, with Zion's

family deeply satisfied in their mother.

12 – 16 P. Miscall, 125 – 36, concludes his special study of chs. 34 and 35 by exploring the relationship between those two earlier chapters and the conclusion of the book in 66:12 – 24. He points out that the two passages share much in terminology, themes, imagery, and style. For instance he writes (126), “Comfort and anger are juxtaposed, but, unlike our poem [i.e., chs. 34 and 35] that places them in two separate parts, here scenes of peace and prosperity rapidly alternate with those of wrath and death.”

In 8:6 – 8, in one of his most graphic images, Isaiah pictured Assyria — the cruelest enemy Israel and Judah ever had to face — flooding the whole country like an immensely spreading inundation from the Euphrates. He then went on to promise endlessly increasing peace as the result of the Messiah’s reign (9:7). Now the analogy of the overflowing river is applied to that peace (v.12), the nations coming up not now in devastating conquest but in peace and with their wealth (cf. 48:18; 60:5 – 11).

The thought of Zion’s children as nursed by her moves to the thought of God as mother of his people (v.13). This is dramatic and surprising, for in earlier chapters God has been represented as the husband and Zion as the wife (e.g., 54:5). Once again, then, the prophet demonstrates the freedom of inspiration in using illustrative language (see comments on 60:16 and 62:5). Here the purpose is to make it clear that the Lord is the real source of those blessings mediated to Zion’s children through her.

The same flexibility is shown in v.14, where grass is not a symbol of human frailty (cf. 40:8) but rather of nourishment under God’s blessing. In this way God’s power will be shown in grace to his servants but in wrath to his enemies. The manifestation of his wrath is expressed especially in terms of fire, which, like the whirlwind and the sword, has great destructive potential (vv.15 – 16). As Young (in loc.) points out, the apparently universal language of v.16 is probably to be understood of the people of Israel, for the context limits it in this way.

17 – 21 To understand v.17, it should be remembered that it is possible to consecrate oneself to a false god.The prophet clearly has in view those described in 65:3 – 5 (for the phrase “the one in the midst of,” see Notes). In v.18, the

phrase “their actions and imaginations” refers to the Jews and their departure from the true God (cf. 65:2). Isaiah had seen the glory of the Lord in the temple (ch. 6), where it had also been revealed to him that the people of Israel would not accept his message. Frequently during the course of his prophecy, he has seen the light of God going forth and the Gentiles being attracted to it (e.g., 2:1 – 4; 42:6; 49:6; 60:1 – 3). Now he expresses their promised knowledge of God in terms reminiscent of his own inaugural vision.

Young (in loc.), commenting on v.19, points out that the precise language used here of a sign is used in Exodus 10:2 and Psalm 78:43 of a miracle, and he interprets it of Christ. Kidner (in loc.) suggests that Matthew 12:38 – 40, with its reference to Christ crucified and risen, relates to this. The survivors are the Jewish remnant, and they go out to many a foreign country to proclaim the glory of the true God.

The beautiful picture in v.20 is based on the Levitical system of offerings.The Gentiles will bring the dispersed remnant to the temple, as though the Gentiles themselves were Israelites and the members of the dispersion are the offerings they will bring to present to the Lord. It is not impossible grammatically that the words of v.21 apply to the Gentiles, which, in this case, anticipates the Pauline teaching that there is no barrier to blessing or to privilege in Christ (e.g., Gal 3:28 – 29). It seems more likely, however, that they apply to priests and Levites selected from among the regathered brothers mentioned in v.20.

22 – 24 God here makes the greatest and most comprehensive of all of his promises: the guarantee of his pledges to his people. He further affirms that the wider vision of the worship by all humankind will also find its fulfillment. This is expressed in terms of the old, God-given Jewish system of special days and Sabbaths for worship and, with many other aspects of these two final chapters, raises important questions of interpretation (see Introduction, pp. 450 – 53).

The prophecy ends on a note of the starkest realism. It pictures vividly the lessons to be learned from the eternal judgment of God on sinners for their rebellion against him, and it should be compared with 37:36. Note that this judgment will have human approval. This reminds us of the awesome “Hallelujah!” of Revelation 19:1, coming as it does immediately after the depiction of a great judgment. God’s people must agree with all he says, for he is

God.

NOTES

65:4 The NIV's "keeping secret vigil" assumes, with the NEB, the repointing of בַּנִּצּוּרִים (*bannṣûrîm*, "in hidden places") to *bannis.s.ûrîm*, though, of course, both expressions require interpretation.The esoteric element in much religion makes either possible.

The NIV's "broth" follows the Qere, 1QIsaa, the LXX, and the Targum in reading מְרָק (*mᵉraq*) instead of the Kethiv's פִּרְק (*pᵉraq*, "fragment").

11 "Fortune" and "Destiny" translate הַגַּד (*haggad*) and הַמְנִי (*hamnî*), which, as Whybray (in loc.) says, conceal the names of the Syrian god Gad, personifying good luck, and Meni, "a god of fate, possibly identical (though masculine) with the Arabian goddess Manat," mentioned in the Qu'ran.

66:13 The NIV's "her child" in fact translates אִישׁ (*ʾîš*. Young (in loc.) comments, "Not only as children sucking the mother's breast does God comfort His people, but also as a mother comforts her grown son. . . . The mother's love for her offspring remains firm throughout life and thus forms a natural comparison for the divine comfort (cf. 40:1)."

17 The NIV, following the Kethiv, renders אַחַר אֶחָד בְּתָוֶךְ (*ʾaḥar ʾeḥad battāwek*) as "following the one in the midst of," suggesting an illicit rite conducted by a group with a leader, such as that described in Ezekiel 8:7 – 11. P. Volz (*Jesaia II* [Leipzig: Deichertsche, 1932], in loc.) sees a reference to a mystery cult, thus dating the verses extremely late. This is unnecessary.

18 Oswalt (in loc.) gives the literal translation, "But I — their works and their plans — it is coming to gather all the nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory."This is difficult to understand, and the NIV tries its best to interpret it. Oswalt's note deals with various suggested emendations.

19 For "Tarshish," see the note at 2:16. פּוּט (*pût*, "Put") follows the LXX (B),

rather than the unknown פּוּל (*pûl*, “Pul”) of the MT.The NIV’s “Lydians” is literally “Lud.” Put and Lud occur also in Ezekiel 27:10; 30:5, the first being in Africa (cf. Ge 10:6) and perhaps also the second, which could, however, be Lydia in Asia Minor. The text of the NIV, therefore, represents possibilities, not certain identifications. Tubal and Greece are mentioned in Ezekiel 27:13, the former almost certainly being the Tiberanoi of northeastern Asia Minor mentioned by Herodotus.

24 A comparison with Jeremiah 7:32 – 8:3 strongly suggests the prophet has the Hinnom Valley, or Gehenna, in mind. Mark 9:48, in its context (vv.42 – 49), applies this to eternal punishment.

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The people of Judah, who have already suffered much at the hands of the Assyrians, are depicted as prostrate and yet alive, like grain that has fallen bruised but safe on the threshing floor after the thresher has battered it severely with his flail (v.11).The image underlines their helpless condition but also sounds a note of hope. Judah is not chaff but grain, and “the LORD Almighty,” who used Assyria in the downfall of Babylon, is also the God of Israel,who will fulfill his purposes for them. Their main human hope has gone, but this will leave them free to put their trust in the Lord.

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