

An Adventure in Reading The Scroll of Isaiah

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Introduction: I am embarking on an adventure in reading from the scroll of Isaiah, readings with imagery as the guiding thread and main focus. The particular passages exhibit a range of commonalities and differences in how images work in them. Much of what I do, including the notions of a labyrinth and echoing, is based on my previous work and is an extension of it. However, I no longer speak so confidently of reading the scroll in its entirety and as a whole. I prefer the word scroll to book because the latter carries so many connotations of unity, consistency and wholeness.

Isaiah is poetry and I find Alter's description relevant to my present undertaking.

Poetry, working through a system of complex linkages of sound, image, word, rhythm, syntax, theme, idea, is an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse...and a poem may exhibit real disjunctures or inconsistencies where we look for intricate unities. Nevertheless, it need not be an act of "idolatry of the text" to claim...that poetry is a way of using language strongly oriented toward the creation of minute, multiple, heterogeneous, and semantically fruitful interconnections in the text (113).

Although I do give some notice to other aspects of these complex linkages, my focus is imagery.

An image is a concrete, physical object, even including a person, that is described in the language of the text and that we, the readers, can visualize and imaginatively hear, touch, smell or taste. An image tends to the sensual and the imaginative, and a theme

to the intellectual. For example, we see an ox and we think, dumb (Miscall 1999: 41-42.)

Francis Landy comments, “We are used to the notion of holistic reading, yet it is impossible to read Isaiah except in fragments” (191-92). Roland Barthes calls such fragments *lexias*, “units of reading” (13-14). The passages discussed in this paper are a few such fragments, such *lexias*. The fragments have varying modes and degrees of internal structure and form and fit with their immediate contexts in different ways. They are not separate or independent poems that stand apart from their context. Second, the intensity and detail of my reading of each fragment varies. Finally, these are individual readings that relate to the entire scroll of Isaiah but I make no proposals about the overall structure and content of the scroll of Isaiah.

I have been obsessed with Isaiah for almost 30 years in my teaching and my study; imagery has been a frequent focus. Although I concentrate on imagery in this paper, I do not ignore and often note the roles of other poetic elements such as the varied use of the Hebrew verbal system, simile, word play, repetition of terms and the addition of new ones, speakers and spoken to. The scroll is an incredible mine for reading biblical poetry and I offer a few nuggets for your consideration.

Labyrinth and echo derive from the work of critics such as J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom and John Hollander. In relation to Isaiah, the two terms refer to the consistent allusions, both back and forth, of one poetic passage to another and to others. Any one passage echoes others and tracing those echoes and parallels in our reading creates a labyrinth. I don’t claim to find “the labyrinth” of Isaiah since there are just too many other ways to trace echoes, for example, words, syntax, poetic structure and sound. With the exception of a few pointers to parallels

within the Hebrew Bible and in the Canaanite myth of Baal, I do not follow threads beyond Isaiah. This is a practical limit and not an integral part of my ways of reading. Indeed I was first struck by the usefulness of the notion of reading building a labyrinth by Bloom's passing comment that the fall of Satan's legions into Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost* is a distant echo of the withering, falling leaves of Isa 34:4 (135-36). The comment was one spur for my extended reading of the poem in Isaiah 34-35.

Further "fragments," not "poems" or "oracles," relates to the relatively late addition to the manuscript of the division into chapters and verses for the purposes of reference. I consistently speak of chapters and verses for just this purpose, ease of reference, and not because they always reflect clear sections or complete poems in the scroll. My last two fragments cross chapter and verse divisions: 42:22-43:2 and 43:24b-44:3.¹

Finally, with a few exceptions I do not deal with the complicated question of who's speaking and to whom and of when one speaker finishes and another begins; this is chiefly the issue of the relation of the speeches of YHWH and of the prophet. And this is an issue I have only studied in ancillary mode, never as my primary topic.

Chapters 1-3: Fragments: The scroll of Isaiah announces itself to be a vision envisioned by Isaiah son of Amoz. The vision is in words and is seen in the imagination, in the mind's eye. "Eyes" to see the vision implies the body, particularly parts of the head. There are also "ears" to hear, to give ear and, fitting the poetic, figurative nature of Isaiah's language, the first ears mentioned belong to heavens and earth, not to humans. Humans are summoned to hear in v. 10 using the same verbs as v. 2. YHWH speaks or has spoken, implying a mouth. Israel does not know or

understand in their mind, or heart, the center of both knowledge and emotion.² The implication of ears and a mouth continues in a subsequent passage that plays on eating and that closes with the mouth named:

If you are willing and you listen/obey,³ the good of the land you will eat:

But if you refuse and rebel, by a sword you will be eaten,⁴

for the mouth of YHWH speaks (1:19-20).

The closing phrase occurs later in the scroll. Chapter 58 is a series of meditations on right ritual, specifically fasting and Sabbath observance, partly balancing the powerful condemnation of ritual in 1:10-17. Like 1:19-20, 58 is cast in conditional form: if you care for others and restrain yourself, "then your light will break forth like the dawn" (v. 8).⁵ The series closes with feeding and our phrase.

If you call the Sabbath Delight, the holy day of YHWH Honored, and if you honor it

by not following your own ways [*derek*], by not seeking your own pleasure or speaking an idle word,

Then you will delight in YHWH and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth

and I will feed you [cause you to eat] the heritage of Jacob your father,

for the mouth of YHWH speaks (58:13-14).⁶

To return to the beginning of the scroll, the poet denounces the people first as a singular group – “sinful nation” (*goy hote*) – then as a plural group – “offspring of evildoers” (*zera` mere`im*). He questions the latter, the corrupt sons – “you” is masc. pl. – about their continuing punishment and then describes a beaten body. The concluding triads intensify the initial couplets – head and heart; foot and head.

On what can you be beaten further that you continue to rebel?

The whole head is ill and the whole heart sick.

From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it:

a bruise and a sore and a bleeding wound.

They have not been drained, and they have not been bound up, and they have not been softened with oil (1:5-6).

The battered body is singular and is that of the collective people or of a recalcitrant child; “sons” are a figure for God’s people. Isaiah consistently plays back-and-forth with plural and singular for the people, a group or an individual. People and/or child are an answer to the question, Whose body? The next verses offer another reading that answers the question, A body like what? “Your” is still masc. pl.

Your country is a desolation; your cities are burning in fire;⁷ your land, in your very presence aliens are eating it: a desolation, as overthrown by aliens.

And daughter Zion⁸ is left like a booth in a vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city (1:7-8).

The body is analogous to “your” land and figures the devastation experienced by both humans and land. The desolate land, including cities, assumes a human aspect by being likened to a battered body. (The natural and the human are already present in the “ears” of heavens and earth.) At the same time the body’s material and earthly aspect is highlighted; God fashioned the human body “from dust of the land” (Gen 2:7).⁹ Body and land figure each other; one is not primary and the other an image of it. In the remainder of the paper I note the parts of the body employed for body imagery and in my translations I render the terms referring to the body, e.g.,

hand and arm, literally to highlight the image.

The latter passage, 1:7-8, envisages a land invaded and pillaged by a foreign army. Chapters 36-37 narrate the image at some length, relating it to Sennacherib's devastation of Judah and siege of Jerusalem in 701. These chapters, however, rejoice in the positive outcome that Jerusalem withstands the siege whereas chapter one regards this as bare survival: daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard.

A sick and withering body and a devastated land similarly figure one another in a striking passage in 10:16-19 that follows the oracle against Assyria in vv. 5-15. Verses 16-19 are double-edged and apply to both Assyria and Israel. The oracle mixes images of body and land and doesn't juxtapose them as 1:5-6 and 7-8. The mutual troping of body and land is more apparent.

Therefore the lord, YHWH of hosts, sends emaciation amongst his fat ones, underneath his nobility [glory]¹⁰ a burning bums like the burning of fire.¹¹

The Light of Israel becomes a fire and his Holy One a flame.

It bums and eats his briers and thorns in a single day and the splendor [glory] of his forest and his fertile fields, from soul to flesh,¹² it will destroy. It is like the wasting away of one faltering¹³ and the remnant of the trees of his forest are few and a youth counts them [writes them down].

A related body image occurs in 17:4 in the midst of a very difficult chapter. "It will be in that day: The weight [*kabod*] of Jacob dwindles and his fat flesh is emaciated."

We just looked at the closing verses of chapter 58 and earlier in that chapter the poet connects body and land. In this passage, "your bones" is part of the body of the collective people

(“you” is masc. sing.) and is followed by the two similes “like a watered garden, like a spring.”

The statement is positive.

If you remove from your midst the yoke...if you give of yourself to the hungry...

Then your light will rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like noontime.

YHWH will always guide you and satisfy your need in scorched land;

He will strengthen your bones and you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of

water whose waters never fail (vv. 9-11).

Garden and water take us back to the close of chapter 1 where the image of garden is negative.

Zion, by justice, is redeemed, and her repenters/returners,¹⁴ by righteousness.

But destruction for rebels and sinners together, and forsakers of YHWH are finished.

For they are ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted;¹⁵ and you blush for the gardens that you have chosen.

For you will be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden that has no water.

The strong will be like tinder, and his work like a spark;

They will bum, the two of them together, and there will be no quencher (1:27-31).

"The two of them together" refers most immediately to the strong and his obviously sinful work and then to the "rebels and sinners together" who are doomed.

Justice (*mišpaṭ*) and righteousness (*ṣedeqah*) are a central theme in Isaiah and are fundamental social and moral values. They refer to the proper and beneficial actions of society's members, actions that should usher in a just and peaceful society. In this context the two terms are inclusive of both just actions and the resultant righteous society and, since destruction and

being finished parallel them, they also point to the judgment and punishment that destroy the wicked and leave the righteous (see 3:13-15; 34:5; 54:17). Along with his play on Israel as a singular and a plural group, Isaiah also varies his view of Israel as one group, as a nation divided between leaders and people and as a nation or people divided between the righteous/saved and the wicked/doomed.

The relation between society's actions and its just state is usually conditional in Isaiah as in most of chapter 1 and closely connected with redemption (justice) and destruction (injustice). On the other hand, the prophet can step outside this strict conditional frame and envision a time of justice and peace that is not dependent on prior actions and that is for all peoples, not just Israel. Isaiah 2 opens with such a vision or dream. Although this is for a time yet to be, "the back of days," the prophet and reader see it now and therefore I translate with the present tense, not the usual future. The final two lines counteract the violence of war and of the sword intoned in 1:7-8 and 19-20. Strikingly YHWH is not a central actor; he does not actively summon or lead the nations. The first two verbs are Niphal middles with no agent of the elevating named. (See Miscall 1999: 36-37; 53-54; 199 for further discussion of YHWH's varying appearance as actor in the foreground and as a character in the background.)

This will be in the latter times:

The mountain of the house of YHWH is established as the head of the mountains and
raised above the hills.

All nations flow to it; many peoples come and say,

Let us go up to the mountain of YHWH, to the house of the God of Jacob
that he may teach us of his ways [*derek*] and that we may walk in his paths

for teaching comes forth from Zion and the word of YHWH from Jerusalem.¹⁶

He/it judges between nations and he/it decides for many peoples.¹⁷

They beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks;

Nation does not lift a sword against nation, and they no longer learn war (2:2-4).

The passage combines imagery drawn from different areas: natural (mountains) and human (city, judging, farming and war). Although this is grand dream of unity and peace, violence is still in the offering in the literal presence of the words: swords, spears, sword and war.

Summary: Let me summarize a few points and issues as a way into the remainder of the readings from the scroll of Isaiah. First is the echoing of passages that share similar or opposed images. It leads into the labyrinth encountered and created as we read Isaiah. The echoing, the labyrinth, is key to any of my readings but it is not the key to Isaiah. There are always other threads to follow and different ways to trace them. Second is the privilege that I grant imagery in this approach. Themes, plot and characters (speakers, spoken to and spoken about) are there but they are neither the starting point nor the ending point for my reading.

Third are the actual images that I stress in my readings. Following are a few examples. There is the mouth that speaks and eats and that connects with the prevalent body imagery in the scroll extending “from the sole of the foot even to the head.” The sword that eats intones war and its accompanying armaments and violence; the oracle in 2:2-4 negates the latter but still names them. Fire burns and eats in its destructive mode. Eating is itself both an activity and an image that occurs throughout the scroll from 1:7 to 66:17. Cities, lands and plants are consumed. Plant imagery from towering trees to lowly shrubs is found throughout the scroll in a wide

variety of settings with a wide variety of connotations. In our passages it connects directly with gardens with or without water.

Fourth are the contrasting and contradictory meanings and connotations attached to a given image or set of images. In 1:29-30 gardens are sites of illicit worship (see 17:10-11, 65:3 and 66:17) and a waterless garden is a simile, joined with a withering oak, for the sinners' loss of power and vitality. (Note the double use of garden(s): physical place and poetic trope.) In 58:11 a watered garden is a simile, joined with an ever-flowing spring, for the people's vitality and strength (see 30:23-24 and 65:22). Garden, of course, summons Eden, the garden of YHWH, filled with happiness and joy, thanksgiving and song (51:3) but at the same time the site of the first failure to listen and obey. One can eat the good of the land and YHWH will satisfy need and hunger in a dry land or the sword and fire can eat all, human and nonhuman. Fire burns and destroys and also refines, burning away the dross and leaving the pure (1:25; 48:10). This connects with Isaiah's sometime division of the people into the righteous and the sinners. Fire can heat and cook (44:14-20). A final verse in the condemnation of those who aid the doomed woman in chapter 47 captures both aspects of fire.

See, they are like stubble, fire burns them; they cannot save themselves from the power [hand] of the flame. This is not a coal for warming oneself or a fire to sit before (47:14).

Water is vivifying and also a flood that reaches "up to the neck" (8:8). In 8:7-8 land and body figure one another as the flood, itself a figure for the Assyrian king and army, sweeps into *the land* of Judah and comes up to *the neck*. Isaiah invokes the "waters of Noah" that once went over the earth (54:9; see 28:17-18) and YHWH promises to extend to Jerusalem "peace like a

river, and like a flooding stream the wealth [*kabod*] of nations” (66:12).

Isaiah deploys these poetic resources to present his vision, both his dreams of restoration, justice and peace and his nightmares of war, destruction and death, and he presents the vision in vivid and memorable terms. In an admittedly limited contrast we can view the prophet who preaches and proclaims both devastation and salvation in a contest with the poet who loves language and all its resources. 1:21-26 is a powerful story of the once faithful city that is now filled with violence, corruption and injustice. YHWH will smelt her and thereby return her and her leaders to their former status of being just and faithful. The prophet denounces injustice and murder and calls for radical change; the poet portrays the city as a woman and speaks of her dross and slag. In the chapter’s closing verses, cited above, oaks and gardens first allude to objects and places of worship, denounced as sites for apostasy, and then become similes for the desiccated people. The passage closes with a striking scene of unending fire, a sharp contrast with the never failing spring of 58:11: “The strong will be like tinder, and his work like a spark; they will bum, the two of them together, and there will be no quencher.” The image recurs in 34:10 in the center of the scroll – “Her land is burning pitch. Night and day it will not be quenched.” – and in 66:24 the final verse of the scroll – “Their worm never dies; their fire will not be quenched.” The rest of my readings will highlight both this contrast between prophet (message) and poet (language) and the consistent presence, mix and tension, of both the dream (peace, justice, victory) and the nightmare (violence, corruption, desolation).

Fifth and final is the fascinating dance the poet engages in with simile, which uses “like” or “as,” and metaphor, which asserts resemblance or even identity. The people speak of themselves in simile alluding to the total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the poet responds

with metaphor invoking the depravity of the cities:

If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors,

We would be like Sodom, we would resemble Gomorrah.¹⁸

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom!

Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (1:9-10).

The first three above citations from Isa 1:19-20, 58:13-14 and 1:5-6 are all metaphors, no like or as. The poet describes a beaten body and we as readers ask whose body and what can we compare it with? The burned land, which is juxtaposed to the body, is described vividly closing with one simile: “a desolation, as overthrown by aliens.” In other places the poet mixes his use of simile and metaphor. The strong are *like tinder* and his work *like a spark*, but *they burn* – the spark enkindles the tinder – and not *they burn like tinder* or some other dry material. The same occurs in 47:14: “They are *like stubble*, fire burns them.”

Chapters 2-3: The vision of the nations flowing up the mountain of God in 2:2-4 counters the grim close to chapter 1 and expresses a hope, a dream, of what might be. The dream is itself a metaphor, no like or as, for a time and for a world yet to be or perhaps never to be. Isaiah, with his consistent juxtaposition of the positive and the negative, quickly turns from this hope to describe a people, the house of Jacob, and his land filled with soothsayers, wealth and idols. Mention of land summons the body: they worship the work of their hands and their fingers (2:6-8). The dream for “the back of days” clashes with the condition of a people bent on their own interests and then both yield to the horrific vision, the nightmare of the day of YHWH when he rises to terrify the earth (2:9-22). This is an atemporal vision, another extended metaphor that

clashes with that in 2:2-4, of an undefined present-future and the prophet admonishes someone, an individual or a collective, to seek shelter – the imperatives Go! Hide! are masc. sing. The distinction between Israel (Zion, Jerusalem and house of Jacob) and the nations and peoples collapses into the category of humanity ('*adam* in parallel with '*iš* and '*anašim*).

Humanity is humbled; mankind is brought low [*špl*] - do not lift them up [or: do not forgive them]!

Go into the rock; hide in the dust before the terror of YHWH and his dread majesty.

The haughty eyes of humanity are brought low [*špl*]; proud people are humbled -

YHWH alone is exalted on that day.

For there is a day for YHWH of hosts against all that is high and raised; against all elevated and low [*špl*] (2:9-12).

The contrast between the high (pride and arrogance) and the low (downfall and humiliation) dominate this nightmarish vision. The high includes the natural – trees and mountains – and the human – fortresses and ships. But Isaiah does not give only one meaning or value to an image or to a contrast since in the preceding vision, height is strictly positive – “The mountain of the house of YHWH is established as the head of the mountains and raised above the hills” (see v. 14) – and the peoples seek to rise up to it. And being low can mean humble, favored by YHWH.

Thus says he who is high and lifted up, who dwells in eternity, whose name is Holy.

In a high and holy place I dwell and also with one broken and of lowly/humble [*špl*] spirit

So that I can revive the spirit of the lowly/humble [*špl*] and revive the heart of the

broken (57:15).

One passage echoes another and yet another in this labyrinth of images and poetry and the labyrinth includes the reciprocal tension and play of Isaiah's dreams and nightmares, his proclamations of hope and his portraits of disaster. 2:2-4 and 2:9-22 are an excellent illustration. Both involve a fate for humanity with opposite values accorded being on high and neither has the final say for Isaiah. The ghastly scenes of the Day of YHWH question and linger beneath the wondrous vision of the back of days just as the latter questions and lingers beneath the former. When Isaiah's dreams and hopes are manifest, the nightmares and evil are latent and vice versa.¹⁹ The poet-prophet speaks of both and does not describe one without the other; both good and evil are there throughout the scroll.

I am YHWH and there is no other.

Former of light and creator of darkness. Maker of peace and creator of evil.

I am YHWH, maker of all these (45:6-7).

When the prophet-poet cites his own vision of paradisiacal times from 11:1-9, he changes the wording at points and introduces a troubling figure.

A wolf and a lamb feed as one and a lion, like an ox, eats straw and *a serpent: dust is its food.*

They do no evil and they do no corruption on my holy mountain, says YHWH (65:25).

The serpent (*naḥāš*) explicitly recalls the story of Genesis 3 and the curse in v. 14: "on your belly you will move and dust you will eat all the days of your life."

2:9-22 describes humiliation and even death since the dust (*`aphar*) of this passage can refer to the underworld. On the other hand the passage is a scene of emptying, a type of

cleansing. Humanity casts out its idols of silver and gold (v. 20); silver and gold filled the land of the house of Jacob. The emptying anticipates the next scene that focuses on Judah:

Now look! the lord, YHWH of hosts, is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah support and staff--all support of bread, and all support of water-- warrior and soldier, judge and prophet, diviner and elder, captain of fifty and dignitary, counselor and skillful magician and expert enchanter (3:1-3).

Chapter 3 closes as the lord takes away the finery – the list of jewelry in vv. 18-23 figures the fullness – of the noble ladies of Zion leaving them desolate. Seven women will seize one man to take his name and to relieve their shame.

Chapters 4-5: To this point in the scroll the phrase “in that day,” which introduces a comment, summary or further clarification, refers only to grim times and events (2:11, 17, 20; 3:7, 18; 4:1). After the shame of 4:1, “in that day” introduces 4:2-6 that describe a time of restoration, a time apparently beyond the times of desolation. 2:2-4, the previous grand dream, was a defined, imaginative narrative of “the back of days” as the nations ascend the mountain of the house of YHWH, the house of the God of Jacob. It presents a scene of harmony and peace. 4:2-6, on the other hand, is a concentration of mostly positive terms, images and events in a brief space to serve as an anticipation of what is to happen, both immediately (destruction) and in an undefined future (remnant). The passage, metaphor without like or as, is more a collage of scenes, images and words than a narrative and the promise is for a remnant of Israel, of the inhabitants of Zion/Jerusalem, not for all peoples or even for Israel as a whole people. At points in the passage the poet’s concern with imagery and words takes precedence over clarity of syntax and

expression.

On that day the branch of YHWH will be a beauty and a glory, and the fruit of the land a pride and a magnificence for the survivors of Israel. Whoever is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who is recorded [written] for life in Jerusalem, once the lord has washed away the vomit of the daughters of Zion and the bloodstains of Jerusalem he cleanses from her midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning.

YHWH creates over the whole site of Mount Zion and over its assembly places a cloud by day and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night. Indeed over all the glory, a canopy. And a booth will be a shade by day from the heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.

Tracing the terminology and imagery of the pericope would take us through much, if not all, of Isaiah, but I restrict myself to a few comments. Plants – branch and fruit – are signs of endurance and life in this context, but do echo the withering oak at the end of chapter one and anticipate the failed fruit of the vineyard in the immediately following song. Surviving, being left and remaining employ the three main verbal roots for the image and idea of a remnant and they recall daughter Zion being left alone like a booth. Remnant is a symbol of both endurance and survival and, at the same time, a stark reminder of the destruction and death that precede the something that remains. Beneath the overall enthusiasm of the collage, there is a disturbing undercurrent of violence; destruction and restoration go hand-in-hand here and are not simply juxtaposed. The lord [*‘adonai*] washes away the vomit, and cleans away the blood through burning, echoing the smelting process of 1:25. (I note the image of blood and bloodstains but do

not pursue it in my readings; in Isaiah blood involves sacrifice, murder and bodily discharges, including menstruation.) Fire here is also light – note the pleonastic “shining of a flaming fire.” This is one of the few places in Isaiah that darkness – shade or shadow – is positive and implies that light is desiccating heat (see 25:4; 49:2). And beyond the shelter and shade the heat is there with the storm and rain to threaten and to destroy.

The violent undercurrent moves to the visible surface in the next chapters that depict both the people’s injustice and ignorance and their consequent disasters. The prophet speaks to and of the people figured as one, even when he employs the metaphor of the vineyard, or he speaks only to and of the leaders and elite. Injustice, violence and corruption are the characteristic attributes and practices of the people and/or their leaders. Their land grabbing, “adding field to field,” results in an isolation that ironically is an image of remnant, “and you [masc. pl.] live alone in the midst of the land” (5:8), but such are those who call evil good and good evil (v. 20). Their self-indulgence in wine, food and song block their awareness of YHWH’s action, of the work of his hands (vv. 11-12).

The prophet’s denunciations are impressive and powerful and at points the poet moves front and center with emphasis on poetry and imagery. After the Woe! of vv. 11-12 the poet invokes imagery of exile and death. The initial “therefore” ties the first assertion directly to the Woe! and what precedes it; the second “therefore” ties the rest of the scene to this first assertion and the preceding. Verses 13-14 are a series of perfective (qatal) verb forms employed in conjunction with participles.

Therefore my people go into exile without knowledge; his²⁰ nobility [*kabod*] are hungry,²¹ and his multitude is parched with thirst.

Therefore Sheol has enlarged her throat and opened her mouth without measure; her honored and her multitude and her throng and he who exults in her have gone down.²²

Humanity is humbled; mankind is brought low, and the eyes of the exalted are brought low. And the LORD of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.

And lambs graze as in their pasture, and the ruins of the rich aliens eat (vv. 13-17).²³

Like 2:2-4 this presents a narrative, a metaphor and not an allegory, but a bleak narrative set in an undefined time. I translate with presents and perfects, but the Hebrew also has a future cast to it. The story advances in abrupt steps, it does not flow; it is moved by imagery and metaphor and not by a set plot. Ignorance, *beli da`ath*, reaches back from the disregard of YHWH's acts in v. 12 to "Israel doesn't know" (1:3). Lack of knowledge is immediately figured as hunger and thirst contrasting with the preceding self-indulgence. The hunger and thirst are both physical and spiritual and include the elite and hoi polloi. This is direct statement without simile.

Hunger attaches itself to Sheol, a quasi-personification of death,²⁴ who is depicted as just a gaping maw. All descend into it. Her mouth open "without measure" (*beli hoq*) tropes on the people's *beli da`ath*. *Hoq* also means statute or ordinance (10:1; 24:5). This people have no use for knowledge or law. "Her" in "her honored..." refers to both Jerusalem and Sheol. Whatever they were in life, the dead now belong to Sheol, an anticipation of the king of Babylon's crash into Sheol, into the Pit (14:12-20). Multitude (*hamon*), throng (*ša'on*) and exulting (*`alez*) all connote noise and din; a noisy, tumultuous crowd goes down into the underworld.²⁵ We both see and hear the descent.

“Humanity is humbled.” The poet swerves from images of hunger and of the mouth to focus on the motif of descent introduced in the scene of all going down Sheol’s gullet. By citing the first clause in 2:9 he inserts the cosmic cataclysm of 2:9-22, the descent into the rock and the dust, into this scene that quickly expands from just Judah and Israel. However, the remainder of 5:15 is only similar to 2:11 and 17 and the prophet’s concern with justice and righteousness in chapter 5 asserts itself although here they are divine accomplishments or attributes (see 1:27).²⁶ This is not a literal repetition of 2:9-22 where YHWH arises to terrify the earth with no mention of justice and righteousness (vv. 19, 21). The poet shifts from humanity to divinity by shifting to the other pole in the opposition high and low; humanity crashes while YHWH arises.

In the final panel the poet returns to the image he began with, eating, and rounds out his brief and complicated story but without returning the focus to Judah and Israel. A flock feeding is an ambiguous symbol of peaceful feeding but feeding amongst ruins that are not their own pasture (“as in their pasture”: Beuken 2003:143; this is the only simile in the fragment). The wreckage implies the preceding disaster that produced it (see 14:30; 17:2). The scene alludes to the retribution announced against the Vineyard; YHWH will tear down its protective hedge so that it will be ravaged and trampled. Ruins, *horboth*, alludes to the sword, *hereb*, that eats.²⁷ The debated *garim* – aliens or sojourners – recalls the foreigners, *zarim*, who are eating the land in front of the people (1:7). In this grim close, to eat ties in with both the sword and the fire that eat.

This grisly display of hunger, eating, descent and exaltation, with its direct allusion to 2:9-22, gives a worldwide cast to the prophet’s denunciations so that, although the four Woes in 5:18-23 refer first to Israel and Judah (5:7), this limited reference is not always apparent. Those

“who drag iniquity with cords of falsehood,” who are wise “in their own eyes,” who indulge alcoholic fancies and who, at the same time, acquit the guilty and convict the innocent because of bribes are any who do this. Israelites and Judahites are a prime example and focus, but corruption and injustice are not characteristic only of Israelites. These people reject YHWH’s teaching and the word [*‘imrah*] of Israel’s Holy One, and that is just what the peoples and nations ascend the mountain to obtain (2:3). The announcement of disaster starting in v. 24 – “therefore” (*laken*) connects it with the preceding – has no one application. Teaching and word are figures for God’s ways and paths that are, of course, metaphors. Isaiah consistently speaks of the need to walk in God’s ways, to follow his teaching, but seldom invests the images with explicit content.

In the closing scenes of chapter 5 Isaiah turns to impressive imagery to convey his vision of divine rage and the onrush of a force of destruction. The poet depicts the advancing force obliquely, notably in metonymies and similes; the scene closes in the dark and the murky. Isaiah’s vision of YHWH in a temple filled with smoke both contrasts with and fits with the close of 5.

Therefore, as a tongue of fire eats stubble, and dry grass sinks down in the flame,²⁸

so their root will be like dry rot, and their blossom go up like dust;

for they reject the teaching of YHWH of hosts, and the word of the Holy One of
Israel they despise.

Therefore the anger of YHWH was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his
hand against him and struck him;

The mountains quaked, and their corpse was like garbage in the middle of the

streets.

For all this his anger has not turned away, and still his hand is stretched out.²⁹

He raises a signal for nations³⁰ from afar, and he whistles for him from the end of the earth: Look! hastily, swiftly he comes!

Not one is weary, not one stumbler with him;

He does not slumber and he does not sleep;

No belt on his loins is loose, and no thong of his sandals is broken;

His arrows are sharpened, and all his bows are bent;

His horses' hoofs seem like flint,³¹ and his wheels like the whirlwind.

His roaring is like a lion, he roars³² like young lions;

He growls and he seizes prey, he carries it off, and there is none to rescue.

He growls over it in that day, like the growling of Sea.

And if one looks to the land--only darkness, distress; and light darkens in clouds.

The fragment opens with similes of plants, dryness and fire, reminiscent of the trees, gardens and fire at the close of chapter 1. Fire eats and “tongue of fire” expands the oral image. It is a complicated structure of simile built on simile: as fire eats stubble so their root will be like rot, not something like “as fire eats stubble, it will eat their root.” The pairs figure totality: stubble and grass, root and blossom, sink down and go up, teaching and word, and reject and despise (see 1:4). Total abandonment of God’s way brings total destruction. Even though it employs similes, the fiery image is a metaphor.

In this verse and throughout the excerpt, the poet employs several verb forms to express

aspect and tense. The first two lines of v. 24 use an infinitive followed by three *yiqtol* (imperfective) verbs to express the process of eating and rotting. The final two verbs are *qatal* (perfective) forms that express the rejection of YHWH's word as finished fact: this is what they have done and what they do at any time.

The second "therefore," *`al ken*, looks more to what follows than to what precedes and to some extent sets the previous verse (v. 24) apart and opens a new panorama. The *qatal* and *wayyiqtol* forms capture the fact of YHWH's wrath and its devastating and continuing effects; the verse ends with a participle: "still his hand is stretched out." The anger of YHWH is akin to fire and is now directed to his people as a singular collective (he and him), not the plurality of the preceding (they and their). The first and last lines match in the shared talk of anger and a stretched out hand, but in the middle line the poet is taken with this image of quaking mountains and the dead even though it doesn't fit neatly in context. The image anticipates the many mentions of mountains, shaking and the dead, for example, 13:1-16, 14:4-20, 34:1-4 and 63:19-64:1. The power of natural mountains contrasts sharply with the crass image of human garbage in the town streets. "Their corpse" figures both the mountains as dead from their quaking and human corpses strewn on them. "Like garbage" is the last simile until v. 28 where hoofs are like flint.

"He raises a signal [*nes*]" or "he raised."³³ We picture the raised signal summoning the force both to a gathering site and then to the attack. The raising itself is a past and/or present action. I assume that "he" is YHWH of the preceding. His stretched out hand now rises. Nations from afar are a common image in Isaiah that depicts both foreign armies invading and foreign peoples coming to help and to learn.³⁴ YHWH whistles: this may be a powerful force

approaching but it is strictly at God's beck and call. In 7:18 YHWH whistles for the fly and the bee in Egypt and Assyria.³⁵ Whatever we make of this force, Isaiah conceives it as one entity or person, composed as it were of many but with the main impact in the singular.

Look!: the signal, the call are effective immediately and the force comes hastily, swiftly: two adverbs precede a *yiqtol*. This is not to be what others expected "the plan of the Holy One of Israel" to be, a plan they wanted to hasten (5:19). The first two negations of the weary and a stumbler employ the particle *'eyn* with an adjective and a participle while the next two, slumber and sleep, use *lo'* with a *yiqtol*. Stumbling and sleeping are ongoing actions and there is none of either. "He does not slumber" refers to both the entire force figured as an individual and to any one member of it. For example, NIV renders "not one slumbers or sleeps." The next pair are items of clothing, usually taken as military garb. Each item is in a construct chain – belt-of-loins and strap-of-sandals – with a Niphal qatal negated by *lo'*. Isaiah tells us who and what aren't there; he never directly describes this force. Yet through these absences, we can imagine and picture this onrushing, unstoppable force with their neat and tight loincloths and sandals. The poet carefully builds his poem with repetition and diversity. He moves from the person to his military garb to his weapons and to his transport. The tight poetic structure both describes and figures the strict discipline of the military force.

Arrows and bows are an expected military pair and are described positively using passive participles: sharpened and drawn. "His horses' hoofs" and "his wheels" shift from direct statement to metonymy and simile. The hoofs stand for the whole horse and for the speed of the horse; the wheels stand for the whole chariot drawn by the same swift horse. And now we are seeing horses and chariots in the force's possession. The hoofs "seem like flint" – note the

emphatic simile employing a verb of seeming, thinking, with the comparative phrase – not only do they carry the horse over rough terrain but they can be weapons in themselves. The whirlwind is both swift and destructive (17:13; 29:6). “See, YHWH comes in fire and like the whirlwind his chariots” (66:15).

Roaring like a lion continues the animal imagery introduced by the horses. The poet shifts style and follows a noun “his roaring” with a verb “he roars” and for the first time uses similes to describe the advancing force itself, not just its means of transport. He follows this with a story *in nuce* that picks up the simile with the lion but now as an image in itself without a like or as. He, both the lion and the force, growls, takes prey and carries it off with no one to rescue it. (See 42:22 where YHWH’s people are in a similar situation.) The latter phrase, like the first pair of the weary and the stumbler, employs the negative *‘eyn* with a participle. The poet has come full circle stylistically in his description.

The roaring motif continues in the next line, now set “in that day,” the phrase that marks a further comment or clarification and thereby makes a slight break from the preceding. “He growls over it,” presumably “it” is the prey of the preceding verse and “he” is still ambiguous. And a simile, “like the growling of Sea,” is added to the simile of the lion. I capitalize Sea to punctuate the allusion to the Canaanite myth of Yamm, the sworn enemy of Baal. (See 51:9-10 for a fuller parallel.)³⁶ The poet moves beyond the natural and the human into the mythic. The excerpt closes with murky imagery and meaning; sea is repeated, now with lower case “s”, and is contrasted with land. On the roaring sea one (unspecified and impersonal) looks to the land but there is only gloom and darkness there. (See 51:15 and 57:20 for related sea imagery.) Perhaps in parallel with 8:22 *‘ereš* means “underworld,” a dim echo of the descent into Sheol’s maw.³⁷

The final line is difficult syntactically and may be textually troubled. The poet's need to say and image darkness and murk perhaps exceeds the bounds of language and his poetry stumbles.

Chapter 5 closes with this climactic denunciation of Israel and the announcement of the dramatic advance of an invading army. Within the scroll of Isaiah this disciplined, indefatigable force figures Assyrian, Babylonian and cosmic invading armies (13:1-16) and beyond them the Persians, even though they come to free Israel from exile. 5:24-30 is an announcement and description of coming destruction and of the force that is to accomplish it with YHWH standing in the background as the ultimate punisher and destroyer. Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian invasions are all inspirations for the vision. Brueggemann says of the passage, "The references [to the invasions] provide the theological model" (56). I would recast this, "The references provide the poetic image."

Chapter 33:³⁸ Chapter 32 begins and ends as a vision of, a hope for, a time of peace and justice when a king reigns in righteousness, but, typical of Isaiah, he separates the visions with a challenge to the complacent women (vv. 9-14).³⁹ And the close of the chapter combines opposed images of destruction and happiness.

It will hail when the forest crashes and with lowliness the city is laid low.⁴⁰

Happy are you who sow by every waterway, who let the foot of the ox and the ass roam free.

Chapter 33 follows upon and continues this mixed presentation. The first four verses of the chapter speak of destruction, betrayal, confusion and plunder with the people crying out to YHWH for mercy. The very form of the material conveys the sense of confusion and chaos.

The initial scenes are countered by YHWH's ascent above it all (see 2:9-22, 5:13-17 and 28:5-6) in a scene brimming with positive terms.

YHWH is exalted! Yes, he dwells on high [or: in heaven, *marom*].

He fills Zion with justice and righteousness; he is the stability of your times [?].

An abundance of salvation(s), wisdom, and knowledge, fear of YHWH: this is his/its treasure (vv. 5-6).

The devastation of both humanity and nature, with vv. 1-4, frame YHWH's ascent:

“Highways are desolate; travelers have ceased... Land mourns, languishes; Lebanon is ashamed” (vv. 7-9). Again YHWH rises: “Now I arise...Now I exalt myself; now I lift myself” (v. 10).

But “you” (masc. pl.; identity?) give birth to dry grass and fire eats “you” (vv. 11-12). There are striking parallels to this eating or devouring fire: YHWH's “tongue is like an eating fire” (30:27) and he comes in “a flame of eating fire” (30:30).

Sinners (the same as “you”?) react in fear in Zion to the consuming fire. “Who of us can live with an eating fire? Who of us can live with unending flames?” A brief entrance liturgy, reminiscent of Psalm 15, follows. It echoes the justice and righteousness that YHWH installs in Zion in v. 5 and the condemnation of oppression and bribery in 1:15-26. If one lives justly and righteously, the effect is installation on high, now a positive place for humans, and sustenance (vv. 14-16). “This one will dwell on high, rock fortresses will be his lofty refuge, his bread supplied, his water assured.” The just one thus dwells with YHWH (v. 5; see 57:15 cited above), yet this is the same YHWH who brings down those who live on high (22:15-19; 26:5-6).

The final verses of the chapter follow this assurance of protection and I read them as a dream sequence, a vision of a better time and place, a Neverland, that accords with the assurance

and that hopes to counter the scenes of destruction and confusion that precede it. (The root *hazah* that introduces Isaiah's vision in 1:1 and 2:1 occurs in verses 17 and 20; it can be translated as see, perceive, inspect and envision.) I translate in the present to capture the atemporal aspect of the dream; the imperfective forms express the process, not just the simple act, of perceiving, of dreaming.

Your eyes envision a king in his beauty; they see a land stretching far.

Your mind⁴¹ contemplates the terror:⁴² Where is the counter? Where is the weigher?

Where is the counter of towers?

A barbarous people you do not see, a people whose speech [lip] is too difficult to comprehend,⁴³ too stammering of tongue to understand.

Envision Zion, city of our festival.⁴⁴

Your eyes see Jerusalem, a calm pasturage, a tent not to be moved, whose pegs are never to be pulled up, and all its ropes are not to be broken.

And there YHWH is majestic for us:⁴⁵

A place of streams, wide⁴⁶ rivers; no oared vessel goes there, no majestic ship passes.

For YHWH is our ruler; YHWH is our leader; YHWH is our king; he saves us.

Your ropes are slack; they cannot hold firm their mast; they cannot spread a sail.

Then it is divided, an abundance of spoil;⁴⁷ even the lame plunder.

No inhabitant says, "I am ill"; the people who are living in her are forgiven their sin (vv 17-24).

An individual, "your" is masc. sg., is addressed metonymically; eyes and mind underline that the vision is glimpsed in the mind's eye. The individual can readily be the one ensconced in

the lofty fortress. The king “in his beauty” echoes the many passages in the scroll that speak of the magnificence and glamour of people, city and God (see 4:2, 28:5, 60:13 and 62:3). A people soon describe YHWH as “our king.” The king “in his beauty” may be equated with or only compared to YHWH; the ambiguity is reflected in the debate in commentaries whether this is a human or divine king. In either case the king exists in the realm of fantasy and dream. This is similar to the preceding vision or dream of a king and princes, a hope for an alternative society (Beuken 2000:207).

See! a king reigns with righteousness and princes rule with justice.

Each of them is like a refuge from the wind, a shelter from the storm.

Like streams of water on dry ground, like the shade of a massive rock in a weary land
(32:1-2).

In 33:17 the land stretching far is double-edged: YHWH calls nations from afar to attack (5:26) and brings his sons and daughters from afar (43:6). And he calls on those both far away and near to pay attention to his mighty deeds (33:13). The double-edge of peace and of violence continues as the dreamer muses on the past census takers and tax collectors who are not there in the dreamland. Even though negated and not seen, they and the barbarous folk, the terror that the heart contemplates, are still literally there in the text to disturb the dream.

“Depths-of-lip” and “stammering-of-tongue” intone body language and, in a further disturbance of the dream, they echo the contradictory message of Isaiah. The people are not to understand God or prophet.

Listen carefully, but do not understand; look closely, but do not know.

Deaden the mind of this people; stop up their ears; seal their eyes–

Lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their minds, and then repent and be healed (6:9-10).

The prophet or even YHWH himself speaks to this people “with stammerings-of-lip and with another tongue” (28:11). The barbarous and defiant folk may not be there but what of the prophet-poet who presents this vision? Is he comprehensible and understandable? Does he stammer and speak with another tongue?

He has already partially counteracted such dullness and thoughtlessness in his previous fantasy of an idyllic kingdom.

And the eyes of those who see are not sealed; the ears of those who hear pay attention. The mind [*lebab*] of the thoughtless gains understanding and knowledge; the tongue of the stammerers speaks fluently (32:3-4).

He will not be quite so rosy at the close of 33. The poet exhorts the seer, now addressed directly, to look to, to inspect, Zion that may be somewhere in this far-reaching land or is perhaps in a dreamland of its own. And the poet includes himself in the inhabitants of land and city: “city of *our* festival.” Festival invokes the religious or cultic realm that is not explicitly dealt with in the passage until the closing mention of forgiveness of sin. The “our” continues through the declaration of YHWH’s kingship and saving power. Metonymy returns as “your eyes” (still masc. sg.) see Jerusalem, a pleasant pasture, *naweh ša’anan*. The phrase alludes to the idyllic utopia pictured in 32:15-20 when “a spirit is poured upon us from on high” (v. 15) and when “my people live in a peaceful pasturage [*neweh šalom*], in secure dwellings and in pleasant resting places [*menuḥoth ša’nannoth*]” (v. 18; see 65:10). At the same time and in a negative register there is the “pasturage of jackals [if not some demonic creatures]” of the blasted waste of

the following poem (34:13; 35:7). The poet and prophet may well desire to portray an ideal, pastoral dream, a vision of a perfect city and land, the mountain of the house of YHWH, but he can never banish the reality of death and destruction from his poetry, he can never finally counter or overcome that reality. Yet the ideal, the dream, is still there. Although he can't finally banish devastation and death, he certainly can try, and try mightily.

The poet shifts from the pasture to the immovable tent (*'ohel*) whose pegs and ropes will never give way. We picture the tent in the pasture just as we picture Zion-Jerusalem in a far and wide land. The prophet and God encourage the barren woman of chapter 54 using tent as an image for a wide space:

Enlarge the site of your tent (*'ohel*); let the walls of your tents (*miškan*) stretch out.

Do not hold back: lengthen your ropes and drive your pegs in firmly,

For to the right and the left you are bursting (54:2; see 16:5).

In an opposite usage Hezekiah employs the image in his lament: “My dwelling is pulled up and removed from me like a tent of shepherds (38:12; JPS).

Verses 21-22 share a concern for “us” but their imagery does not so neatly cohere. The poet does not continue with the pasture and tent and shifts to a water image – where YHWH is ours or for us – that contrasts with the dryness and fire of the first part of the chapter. (I will soon say more of this play of fire and water.) The image is not of water that nourishes and sustains but of broad streams that, like a moat, provide protection. No ship carrying soldiers or foreign peoples can go there. If we think of actual Jerusalem, far from any significant body of water, it emphasizes the fantasy, the dream of inviolable security.

Following the fourfold affirmation of YHWH's effective leadership, the poet presents a

distinct image of impotence and failure that builds from the imagery of tent and ship. It introduces a decided change in tone and it, with the closing statements, has an ambiguous and unsettling impact on the reading. I reiterate that Isaiah cannot once and for all banish the nightmare from his dream. He addresses a woman; “your” in this instance is fem. sg. We should probably take “her” as a personification of the “oared vessel” that can’t sail there and the image of unsecured rigging as explication of why, but the possibility that this is Zion-Jerusalem cannot be fully dispensed with, particularly since the city was just imaged as a tent with taut ropes. Sail is *nes*, a signal, standard or flag, and like the land stretching far it is double-edged. YHWH raises a standard, a signal, for nations from afar to attack (5:26) and he raises another signal to the nations and gathers the banished of Israel, the dispersed of Judah “from the four corners of the earth” (11:10-12). On the other hand, *nes* occurs in a context with *toren*, translated “mast” in 33:23; both are images for the remnant being gathered in chapter 11.

One thousand at the threat of one, at the threat of five you flee until you are left

Like a *mast* on the head of a mountain, and like a *flag* on a hill (30:17).⁴⁸

The end of the next line in chapter 33 is clear in Hebrew: “the lame plunder plunder.”

The first part of the line is unclear and almost certainly textually corrupt; however it does involve spoil or booty in parallel with the close of the line and echoing the spoil of v. 4 (another difficult line). The questions for me are: Who is plundering whom? Is Zion pillaging or being pillaged? Is Zion the lame or do even the lame now plunder her? Why does the poet introduce such an explicitly violent image at this point, violence that both augments and contrasts with the immediately preceding image of powerlessness? I have no answers at this time and remain intrigued with the line and its context especially the clash of nightmare and dream that

immediately follows in the poem in 34-35.

The final line is similar to the description of “your ropes”: a clear statement with undecided impact and relevance. It continues the abrupt shifts of these closing verses of chapter 33. Illness and sin are not part of the preceding excerpt and again, although negated, they are still literally in the text. And to this point the poet has not taken us explicitly into the broad land or into the city although “And there YHWH is majestic for us” hints at such a placement. No dweller (*shaken*) [of the land and/or city] says, “I am sick,” which anticipates Hezekiah’s illness in 38 and his poem in 38:9-20 with its elaborate play on death and life. The people who live (*yošeb*) in her are the collective, the “we” and “us,” and their sin or iniquity (*`awon*) is forgiven or lifted (*nešû*), paralleling YHWH’s declaration, “Now I lift myself up [‘*ennaše*’]” (v. 10) and recalling “the people heavy with iniquity” (1:4).

Isaiah 42-43: With chapter 40 we enter a quite different part of the scroll of Isaiah with a striking change in form and style but without a matching change in the employment of imagery and in content. At this stage of my reading and study of Isaiah I have far less confidence in proposed approaches, including my own, to reading the scroll of Isaiah as a whole, particularly how to read chapters 40-66 in view of what we encounter in reading 1-39. This includes all the proposed subdivisions within both 1-39 and 40-66. The topic is far beyond the reach of this paper. For now I offer a reading of the fragment 42:22-43:2, a reading that pays attention to imagery, Isaianic parallels and the tension between destruction and restoration.

But first let me backup to look at some aspects of Isaiah’s use of fire and water imagery, particularly passages where he associates or even combines them. At the close of chapter 1 the

poet juxtaposes the dryness of a garden without water (*mayim 'eyn lah*) and tinder, a spark and burning. Lack of water leads to dryness that leads to burning. We find the same in 5:24 without the explicit naming of water. An announcement of impending disaster because of the rebellious people's sin explicitly associates fire and water in a passage that places one simile within another. Their sin will be like the crash of a high wall whose shattering comes suddenly and whose shattering is like the ruthless shattering of a potter's jar

Amongst its fragments a shard is not to be found

To take fire from the hearth or to draw water from the cistern (30:12-14).

The homey image stands at some odds with the violent crashing and smashing that precedes it. The same contrast of the violent and the homey occurs in another passage when people request YHWH to tear open the heavens and to descend. Before him the mountains would quake (or melt) "as fire kindles brushwood and as fire brings water to a boil" (63:19-64:1). The passage in 42:22-43:2 first emphasizes fire alone and then figures both fire and water as ineffective threats thereby anchoring the fragment in Isaiah whatever else we may make of it. The fragment:

This is a people plundered and despoiled, all of them trapped in pits, hidden in prisons;
They are plunder and there is none to rescue; spoil and there is none to say, "Give
back!"

Who among you will give ear to this, pay attention and hear from now on?

Who gave up Jacob for despoilment and Israel to plunderers?

Was it not YHWH whom we sinned against?

They were not willing to walk in his ways; they would not listen to his teaching.

And he poured upon him wrath, his anger⁴⁹ and the fury of war;

It scorched him all about, but he didn't know; it burned him, but he didn't take it to heart [*leb*].

And now, thus says YHWH, your creator, O Jacob, and your fashioner, O Israel!

Fear not, for I redeem you. I call your name. You are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I am with you, and through the rivers, they do not overwhelm you.

When you walk in the midst of fire, you are not charred, and a flame, it does not burn you.

The theme of plunder, booty and being plundered dominate the opening of the passage. We first encountered the theme in the phrase and name Maher-shalal-hash-baz, “Speeding booty hastening plunder” (8:1-3) and again at the close of chapter 33. In part I chose this fragment because of the strong echoes of chapter 33. “There is none to rescue” was the same plight of those taken prey by the attacking army (5:29).

Typical of much of the scroll and perhaps even more characteristic of chapters 40-66, the question of speaker and audience in the excerpt has no one set answer. YHWH speaks directly in the first verse of 42 (continuing his speech from the preceding) and is quoted in vv. 5-9 with an elaborate title at the start. The prophet-poet next requests all to sing a new song to YHWH in vv. 10-12 and announces YHWH’s advance “like a man of war” in v. 13. YHWH shouts and his utterance begins in v. 14. The question for me is, Where does the utterance close? More specifically: Who is speaking in vv. 22-24a (assuming a change of speaker in 24b)? Who is describing the plundered people and asking others to pay attention? YHWH, the poet-prophet Isaiah, both or someone else? I leave the issue undecided.

I am assuming that the poet-prophet speaks next in v. 24b and, through a rhetorical question, answers the immediately preceding questions and at the same time provides a rationale for YHWH handing the people over. He is either speaking as one of the people or the people, the “we,” interrupt him as they do, for example, in 1:8-9. Sinning, not walking in YHWH’s roads and not listening to his teaching recall both the condemnations of chapter one and the grand ascent of the nations in 2:2-4 “that he may teach us of his roads.” These are familiar terms and images throughout the scroll. Just as familiar are the images of heat, war and fire for destruction and the theme of ignorance and inattention. “They” transmutes to “he” from v. 24 to v. 25. Obviously “he” is not one who will pay attention and listen to YHWH’s teaching from now on.

With “But now!” the poet-prophet introduces a sharp contrast with this harsh pronouncement. He quotes YHWH with the title of Creator and Fashioner. Jacob-Israel is not to fear since they are YHWH’s through right of redemption. Passing unharmed through water and rivers counters the announcement of destruction by flood in 8:6-8 (see 30:28). Passing unharmed through fire and flame counters the immediately preceding scorching and burning. As we have consistently encountered in our readings, Isaiah desires to speak of a present and a future of redemption, restoration and total protection from the violence and death of the past, but the shadow of that past always lingers over both this present and this future. The past as described at the close of chapter 42 is invoked at the start of 43 by the double-edged image of fire that burns and that doesn’t burn.

Chapter 43 continues with impressive pronouncements of liberation, redemption and divine power. However, the end of the chapter, as the end of 42, shifts to denunciation and

judgment followed again by contrasting pronouncements of liberation and restoration. I close my paper citing the fragment without comment.

Yes, you [Israel] have made me labor with your sins; you have worn me out with your iniquities.

I, I am he who wipes away your rebellions for my own sake and your sins I don't remember.

Make me remember; let us go to trial; tell me so that you may be found innocent.

Your first father sinned and your leaders rebelled against me. I disgraced the holy princes and I handed Jacob over to utter destruction and Israel to condemnation.

And now hear, O Jacob, My Servant; O Israel, whom I have chosen!

Thus says the Lord your maker, your fashioner in the womb - he will help you:

Do not fear, O my Servant, O Jacob! O Jeshurun, whom I have chosen!

For I pour water on the thirsty ground and streams on the dry ground;

I pour my spirit on your offspring and my blessing on those who spring from you

(43:24b-44:3).

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¹ See Miscall 1999:18-20 for further discussion.

² *Leb* and *Lebab*, usually translated heart, include both of what we today intend by heart and mind: thinking, understanding, emotions and feelings. See DCH.

³ Depending on the context *šama`* can mean to hear or to obey. Obedience implies that one is acting on what one has heard.

⁴ Note the assonance of the two verbs that give the two lines limited end-rhyme: *to'kelu* and *te'ukkelu*.

⁵ “Waters break forth in the wilderness” (35:6) and “He [YHWH] broke rock and waters gushed” (48:21).

⁶ Harold Fisch highlights the many parallels between the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 and Isaiah 1 and claims that Isaiah is citing the Song in both 1:20 and 58:14. He renders the phrase “for the mouth of YHWH has spoken” anchoring both threat and promise in the Song. “The mouth of the Lord has already said this and you know it!” (Pp. 67-68).

⁷ “Burning in fire,” rather than the usual “burned in fire,” reflects the vividness of the Hebrew phrase that is a passive participle (“burnings” or such) in construct or apposition with the noun “fire.”

⁸ Daughter Zion is a trope for Jerusalem (the whole) – Zion (the part). Both part and whole figure each other and, at the same time, can figure the people of Judah. The latter is caught in the translation “daughter of Zion” (NIV).

⁹ Isaiah uses both *'ereš* and *'adamah* for country and land.

¹⁰ *Kabod* occurs twice in this passage. This is a polyvalent term and Isaiah makes good use of the range of meaning. Translations of just this brief passage reflect the range. NRSV and Watts have “glory” in both occurrences while NIV uses “pomp” and “splendor.” JPS has “body” and “mass [of its scrub]” while Blenkinsopp renders “his most distinguished folk” and “the best [of

his woodland].” *Kabod* can be divine glory, an effulgence marking God’s presence (3:8; 6:3; 43:7); a tomb (14:18); honor (22:23); wealth or power (22:24; 61:6); an army or people (8:7; 21:16) and even an ample breast (66:11).

¹¹ The assonance in English mirrors that in Hebrew: *taḥath kevodo yeqad yeqod kiqod ‘eš*.

¹² Watts: “Body and Soul;” JPS: “frame and flesh.”

¹³ With the double meaning of both sick and afraid.

¹⁴ The multiple rendering reflects the layered meanings of Hebrew *šub*. The play is in the preceding verses. YHWH says, “I turn [*‘ašibah*] my hand against her...and I return [*‘ašibah*] her judges as before” (vv. 25-26).

¹⁵ The poet shifts mid-sentence from talking about sinners to addressing them directly (2nd masc. pl.).

¹⁶ Although the beginning of the quotation is clear, the end is not. Most translators end the nations’ speech with quotation marks after “his ways,” but the next phrase is easily ascribed to them as in my rendering. KJV and GNB also close the quotation at this point. When a given character’s speech, including YHWH’s, begins and ends is often indeterminate in Isaiah and reflects both style and content, but examination of this is beyond the scope of this study.

¹⁷ “He/it”: the poet doesn’t specify an antecedent for “judges” and “decides.” It can be God or the teaching and word that come forth. “It” fits with the tenor of the passage that speaks of God but doesn’t portray him as active. “It” implies that teaching and word are something physical that can move. A central aspect of my reading of the scroll of Isaiah is that, in frequent self-

references, it presents itself as one embodiment of the divine word and teaching that goes forth to effect God's word in the world.

¹⁸ I note the interruption by "we." This is a fine example of the issue of speakers in the scroll, an issue beyond the scope of this study. For further discussion of "we," see Miscall 1999:94-99.

¹⁹ These are Freudian terms. For discussion, see Miscall 1999:46-47.

²⁰ "People" is masc. sing.

²¹ The MT reads "men of hunger," but the Versions reflect "dying of hunger." Both constructs, men of... and dying of..., share the same three consonants, *mty*, and differ in vocalization. I assume the poet is well aware of the ambiguity and is playing upon it.

²² Despite the list of four groups, the verb "go down" is singular figuring them all as one collective, as though one individual. The singular is more striking in the Hebrew since the verb comes first, before the list of the four groups. "He who exults in her" anticipates those who have a covenant with Death and with Sheol (28:14-22).

²³ The text and interpretation of the final clause are disputed. The NRSV and others change "aliens" (*garim*) into "kids" (*gedayim*). NRSV: "and fatlings and kids shall feed among the ruins." Even without this emendation there is a disagreement in construing the Hebrew syntax. My translation is similar to Beuken ("in den Trümmerstätten der Wohlgenäharten"), JPS ("the ruins of the stout"), NIV ("the ruins of the rich") and Watts ("wasted hulks of fattings"); they assume a construct phrase for the first two words in Hebrew (*ḥorboth meḥim*). The NRSV and others take the first term as an object of the verb "eat" and the second as the subject such as, "fatlings eat the ruins." In any reading "they eat" is the final word

²⁴ In the Canaanite Baal myth Death, Mot, is a monstrous deity who swallows Baal.

One lip to the earth, one lip to the heavens;

he will stretch his tongue to the stars.

Baal must enter inside him;

he must go down into his mouth.

Coogan: 107.

In Hab 2:5 the poet parallels Sheol and Death, both with gaping maw and insatiable appetite.

The fate of Korah and company also lingers in the background. The earth swallows them and they descend into Sheol (Nums 16:30).

²⁵ See 13:4, 17:12-13, 22:2 and 66:6 for parallels to the noisy crowd.

²⁶ The poet employs the two wayyiqtol forms of 2:9a and then closes with a yiqtol: “the eyes are being brought low” is a possible rendering. The downward movement in 5:15b contrasts with the upward movement of 2:9b: do not lift them up. The poet also emphasizes that this is not a literal citation by a subtle shift in phraseology. “The eyes of haughtiness [gabhuth]” of 2:11a is “the eyes of the haughty [gebohim]” in 5:15b and the masc. sing. qatal *šapal* becomes a fem. pl. yiqtol *tišpalnah*.

²⁷ Blenkinsopp reads *ħorboth* as “swords” and comments, “the four words of v 17b read literally: ‘swords, fat sheep, residing, will eat’” (2000: 211).

²⁸ This accords with Beuken, NIV and NRSV. JPS reads “And hay shrivels as it burns” (see Blenkinsopp and Watts). Beuken (2003:154) notes the rhyme in the pairs *qaš* - *ħašaš* and *maq* – *‘avaq*.

²⁹ The line is repeated in 9:11, 16, 20 and 10:4. The formula ties the denunciations in chapters 5, 9 and 10 together looking both forward and backward. It folds 9:7-10:4 into this passage at the end of chapter 5.

³⁰ This could be “a nation from afar” in parallel with Jer 5:15, moving the final *mem* of nations to the beginning of the next word revocalized as a slightly different word. Or one could achieve the same reading by deleting the final *mem* of nations as a dittography. The singular would accord with the rest of the passage.

³¹ Accepting the usual repointing to *kaššor*; MT’s *kaššar*, like straightness/distress, is perhaps influenced by that term in v. 30.

³² Reading *yīš’ag* with the Qere.

³³ See Watts who puts the whole passage in past tense.

³⁴ See 11:10, 12; 13:2; 18:3; 31:9; and 62:10 for these different uses of raising a signal, *nes*.

³⁵ We could stress the impersonality of the force by rendering “he” and “his” in the description with “it” and “its.”

³⁶ I already noted the parallel with Mot (Death) in 5:13-17.

³⁷ Blenkinsopp translates 8:22: “And if they turn upwards or look down into the underworld all they will see is distress and darkness, gloom and misery,” noting that “*’ereš* = underworld.” He makes no similar equation for *’ereš* on 5:30 although he does note the parallel with 8:22.

³⁸ Since I am concerned with the excerpt in 33:17-24, I do not address the issue of 33’s setting in the context of the scroll of Isaiah. Many make a significant break after 33 and see 34-66 as the

second part of the book with its own subdivisions. For example, Watts' two volume Word Commentary is divided between 1-33 and 34-36, not the traditional 1-39 and 40-66.

³⁹ The challenge combines body and land. The women must beat their breasts for their fields and their land/ground.

⁴⁰ An attempt to render MT without emendation. Beuken (2000:220-22) is similar.

Blenkinsopp's comment is apropos: "the writer's addiction to assonance (*ubarad-beredet, šipla-tišpal, haya`ar-ha`ir*) is partly responsible for the confusion" (433).

⁴¹ *Leb*: JPS renders, "Your throat shall murmur in awe."

⁴² This is usually taken as a reference to the past terror – NIV: "the former terror" – of invasion that has powerful and lingering impact.

⁴³ Lit: depths-of-lip from hearing (*šama`*) => speech is too deep/obscure to hear/grasp

⁴⁴ IQisa^a and other versions read a plural. JPS renders "our city of assembly."

⁴⁵ NIV: The Lord will be our Mighty One; JPS: For there the Lord in his Greatness shall be for us.

⁴⁶ Lit: wide-of-hands.

⁴⁷ A guess at translating a very difficult phrase.

⁴⁸ Beuken (2000:240-44, 275-76), following Kissane, renders the first part of the verse as a military and not a maritime image.

Your cords shall hang loose,
they cannot secure the pedestal of their flag staff,
they cannot spread the signal.

Zion will be so secure that she will not need to summon an army or to establish a gathering site as in 5:26. He feels that the image is a counterpart to that of 30:17.

⁴⁹ NIV, NRSV, Watts and others read with 1QIsa^a “the heat of his wrath” or similar for “wrath, his anger.”